Death of an Author:

Sarah Kane and the Significance of Biography

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INTRODUCTION

> *'I've only ever written to escape from hell – and it's never worked – but at the other end of it when you sit there and watch something and think that's the most perfect expression of the hell that I felt then maybe it was worth it.'*

The epigraph to this thesis is a statement made by the late dramatist Sarah Kane, and it is one which has the effect that Kane must seem to have dreaded: it directly connects her as a person to her work. By calling a certain performance of her work 'the perfect expression of the hell that I felt,' she indirectly allows us to investigate further, to search through her work for examples of that hell. Such connections between an author's biography and his or her work, is perhaps more often than not denied by the author in question. Ask any author and he or she will tell you that his or her novel or play or poem has nothing to do with them, even though much evidence may point to the contrary. They will tell you this because they may feel that by admitting a direct connection between life and work, the artistic value of the work will be reduced.

In his essay 'Literature and Biography', Boris Tomasevskij asks a pertinent question: 'do we need the poet's biography to understand his work, or do we not?'[1] This is certainly one of the central issues in literary theory, and a question that has been asked in different ways by numerous scholars and literary theorists. However, there appears to have been a recent revival of the interest in this particular issue, both in literary practice and theory.

Along with this, there has been an increased interest during the past years up until now regarding author's lives. This has inevitably led to the publication of more biographies, some which are good, and some which seems to have been written with the sole purpose of catering to people's more questionable interests. The latter ones are often a sweet blend of biographical speculation, baked in order to appeal to the reader's craving for savoury details about the author's life.

[1] Boris Tomasevskij, 'Literature and Biography,' in Sean Burke (ed.), *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 82.

From the fictional side of this spectrum is the case of Danish author Peter Høeg, who for long has been a mystery due to his avoidance of the public sphere. Høeg wrote a novel where he clearly drew on autobiographical material, only to tell the readers later that nothing in the book was true. In order to confuse the readers even further, he added that 'nothing in the book was autobiographical, except some objective features based on myself.'[2] What Høeg did was to claim that his book was both autobiographical and fictional, and thus again questioning the relevance of an author's life to his work. Høeg is only one of many who have exploited the reader's interest in biographical details. An American example is James Frey, who was even so lucky as to be chosen for Oprah's book club. Like all books that are chosen for this book club, it received en enormous amount of attention, and gained readers all around the world.

James Frey claimed to have written a heart-wrenching tale of his own life. A life that included imprisonment and other fabricated facts solely created to entice people to buy and read his book. However, when the news leaked that most of the book was fictional, many of those who had bought his book felt deceived. Why? In which ways is it important that it was a false story if it was a good story? Why did these people feel deceived? Would it have been a different matter if Frey had not said beforehand that the book was autobiographical?

My third example was an author who was well aware of the role which the author's biography plays in people's consciousness. The case of JT. Leroy illustrates clearly the shift in focus from the work to the author. He was an invented author personality carefully and consciously created to appeal to a contemporary mindset.[3] This was perhaps an even worse case than that of Frey, since the people behind the invention of Leroy, consistently fed the fans with

[2] 'Det er ikke spor selvbiografisk i denne bok, ut over enkelte helt objektive træk, jeg har taget fra mig selv,' Poul Behrendt, *Dobbeltkontrakten: en æstetisk nydannelse* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2006), p. 16.

[3] Boris Tomasevskij mentions that from the Romantic era, people began to crave knowledge of the author's biography. 'This demand for a potentially existing author, whether real or not, gave rise to a special kind of anonymous literature: literature with an invented author, whose biography was appended to the work.' See 'Literature and Biography' in Sean Burke (ed.), *Authorship,* p. 85.

fictitious facts about Leroy's in order to play on their bad conscience.[4] It even went as far as Leroy telling his audience that he had HIV, thus encouraging Hollywood personalities and rock stars, who were amongst his most faithful fans, to raise money for his cure. Finally though, the truth came out and again readers felt deceived, although many of them loved and cherished Leroy's books before they found out that they were not based on his own life.

These three examples illustrate what Tomasjevskij points out in his essay, namely that 'we must 'consider how the poet's biography operates in the reader's consciousness.'[5] In his book *Dobbeltkontrakten*, Danish critic Poul Behrendt investigates an interesting phenomenon which he calls the 'double contract.' He notes that there are contracts made, not only between the author and his publisher, but also between the author and his or her readers. There are mainly two contracts to be considered, but usually only *one* of them is, as it were, 'signed'. One contract, often created in relation to biographies and non-fiction, requires that everything in the book is true, that it is rooted in reality. The other contract is the complete opposite and requires that the book is solely fictional, and that it cannot be proven otherwise by anyone. This contract is thus related to fictional works.[6] The 'double contract' then refers to the occasions when the author attempts to get the readers to agree to *both* contracts at the same time, so that the piece of work will be accepted as being both fictional and biographical. Readers, however, are not always comfortable with this, and that is when the confusion begins. This is what happened in the case of James Frey, JT. Leroy, and also albeit in different ways, in the case of the late Sarah Kane.

Kane's view on how her work should be received was often quite idealistic. She encouraged her readers and the audience to see her work as separate from herself. She asked them to sign the 'fictional contract' so that her work would appear to be more general, and so that her work should not be seen as fragmented recollections of her life. Contrarily to this, she *also* made

[4] Warren St. John, 'Figure in JT. Leroy Case Says Partner is Culprit,' *The New York Times* online ed., February 1, 2006, see: http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C03E5D9173EF934A35751C0A960.
[5] Boris Tomasevskij, 'Literature and Biography' in Sean Burke (ed.), *Authorship,* p. 84.
[6] See Behrendt, *Dobbeltkontrakten*, p. 19.

statements that inevitably connected her *person* to her *work*, such as stating that she was in love while writing *Cleansed*, or that one of the characters in it was based on a real critic who had written a ruthless review of it. The 'fictional contract' she had encouraged earlier was now challenged by the 'factional contract.' This oscillation between author and work is something that became central to Kane's authorship, and the reviews of her plays were often coloured by facts from her life. She managed, however, to maintain a sort of mystery about her, which I suspect was one of the reasons why her biography was scrutinized both when she was alive and even more so after her suicide in 1999.

One reason why Kane is *still* surrounded by a certain mystery, however, is that she rarely engaged in interviews regarding anything else than her work. During an interview with Aleks Sierz she even asked him if, since she was a writer, she could not write him letters instead of giving interviews.[7] She also resented the act of providing footnotes to her plays, 'believing that if a play was any good it would speak for itself.'[8]

Our lack of facts about who Kane really was may lead to suspicion, because those few who have written books and articles about her are mostly her friends or contemporaries, people who were seemingly aware of the residual hesitance on her part to encourage biographical readings of her plays. They were probably also aware that if information about Kane's life was available, the audience and/or critics would use it for their own purposes. Could it be that the facts about Kane's life have been muffled in order to preserve her wishes and to preserve the artistic authority of her work?

However concerned Kane's colleagues and followers were, they must have neglected to realize that by making many statements in obituaries or books about her, statements encouraging us after her death not to see her work as merely biographical, they greatly contributed to the myth that Kane has become. By consistently emphasising the lack of connection between her author

[7] Information taken from Aleks Sierz's web-page: http://www.inyerface-theatre.com/archive7.html.
[8] David Greig, 'Introduction' to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), p. xviii.

and her work, they almost certainly made audience and readers question what the fuzz was all about. What was it that these people were trying to conceal? The knowledge we have about Kane is slim, and this is mostly because she died so young, but clearly also, because information has been withheld in favour of her art.

What we do know about Sarah Kane though is that she was born in Kelvedon, Hatch, Essex in 1971 to a mother working as teacher and a father who was a *Daily Mirror* journalist.[9] The family were practising Christians, and Sarah herself became an evangelical in her teenage years. This was a faith which she would later come to question and dismiss, but which would play a large part in her plays. She went to Shenfield Comprehensive School, and took a great interest in writing short stories and poems. Allegedly, although Kane hated school, she also recognized that her Drama teachers were great, and that they encouraged her to read and write and act. Having finished school, Kane attended Bristol University, intending to study Drama, but soon found herself interested in other things. At Bristol, she often had a belligerent attitude towards her tutors. When one accused her of writing 'pornographic essays', she reacted by throwing porn mags at him in the next tutorial.

Though this antagonistic behaviour caused much inconvenience for her, Kane spent two years at Bristol writing and directing, as well as acting – although ever so briefly. In 1992, she left Bristol with a first class honors degree. Shortly after she saw Jeremy Weller's *Mad* in Edinburgh – a play which she later would claim to have changed her life. This is one of the descriptions she gave of the play: 'It was a project that brought together professional and non-professional actors who all had some experience of mental illness […] it was a very unusual piece of theatre because it was totally experiential. As an audience member, I was taken to a place of extreme mental discomfort and distress – and popped out at the other end.[10] Knowing what we now know about Kane, it is not difficult to see from her description how this play might have affected both her life

[9] The following biographical facts are from *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 91-92.
[10] Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, p. 92.

and her work. Kane began an MA at Birmingham University in 1992**,** but she was seemingly reluctant to enter academic life and to the idea of studying what had been said before: 'Inevitably what you're studying is what's already been discovered. As a writer, I wanted to do things that hadn't been done, to invent new forms, find new modes of representation. So sitting in seminars dicussing the three-act structure switched me off completely.'[11] Despite this, her time spent at Birmingham was an important period in her life, because it was there that she started writing what would later become her first play, and one of the most controversial plays in the history of British Theatre – *Blasted.* After Birmingham she moved to London and worked as a literary assistant at the Bush theatre while putting the finishing touches on her play.[12] In addition to Weller's play, she was also largely inspired by music, and it is easy to trace her love for bands such as Joy Division, Morrissey and Jesus and the Mary Chain in her work. But these facts do not contain the whole truth about Kane's life, as a more sinister side of life came to haunt her.

During long periods of her life Sarah Kane suffered from depression and was in and out of hospitals, which some claim is apparent in her work. That does not however mean that her work was less important and groundbreaking, but it does mean that one is not easily separated from the other. Aleks Sierz states about *Blasted* that: 'In *Blasted*, Kane took the temperature of the times, and inadvertedly brought down a plague on herself.'[13] What Sierz means by that statement is that *Blasted* was Kane's attempt at opening people's eyes to the horrors that was going on in the world, but instead, the play's brutal violence was what became central, not what it represented. Resultantly, speculations about Kane's own life arose.

Kane worked as an assistant at the Bush Theatre in London, concurrently with evolving her own talent and dealing with the mixed reception of her debut play *Blasted* in 1995, by

[11] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 92.
[12] Ibid, p. 92.
[13] Ibid, p. 93.

someone was regarded 'a disgusting feast of filth,'[14] while others thought it to be the most groundbreaking play to come out of British Theatre since the late playwright John Osborne. James Mcdonald, the resident director at The Royal Court Theatre, who directed many of Kane's plays, looks back on the opening night of *Blasted*, when Kane's reputation was established:

> I sat next to Jack Tinker. The evening was grim. In a theatre seating 62, a serried wall of 45 critics failed to grasp the gallows humour and strange magic of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. On the stairs down from the old Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, the late Jack announced that he thought the play was a news story. This he duly filed from a phone box in Sloane Square, along with a review headed "This disgusting feast of filth." In a burst of competitiveness, the *Daily Telegraph*'s critic rushed into the Circle Bar looking for the author, who he had decided must be mad.[15]

More serious issues than mixed reviews and controversy surrounded Sarah Kane. David Greig, also a playwright and at one point her flatmate[16], states in the introduction to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* that: 'Kane had been plagued throughout her life by bouts of depression. With each occurrence, her depression became more debilitating and, ultimately, she became suicidal.'[17] After a failed suicide attempt made by swallowing pills, she was admitted to the Royal College Hospital in London, where she two days later hung herself in her shoelaces. She was 28 years old.

During her short life Sarah Kane managed to produce five plays and a short film, each of them thought-provoking and all considered autobiographical in some ways, due to reasons that I will return to later in this thesis. In the aftermath of Kane's suicide, there was a revival of her plays, and a re-evaluation of their significance, both in terms of what they could reveal about the author's life, and as to what they meant for the British Theatre scene. The author who had caused so much controversy during her life, was suddenly embraced after her death. Mcdonald notes that

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[14] *Daily Mail* critic Jack Tinker wrote a review headed 'This Disgusting Feast of Filth' where he questioned why the Court 'saw fit to stage it.' See Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 94-95.
[15] James Mcdonald, 'They never got her,' *The Guardian* online ed., Sunday Feb 28, 1999, see: http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3828904,00.html.

[17] Information taken from Aleks Sierz' web-page inyerface-theatre.com, and Greig's 'Introduction' to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, p. xv.

'when she was alive, no one had a good word to say about the playwright Sarah Kane. Since her suicide, everyone loves her.'[18]

Why did people take more interest in Kane after her death? What is it with suicides that invoke interests that we might not have had before? I wonder how many people have become interested in Kane's work *after* they learnt about her life. I suspect there are many.

The same question can be applied to the revival of her plays in Britain after her death. Kane was a well-known dramatist also in Germany, perhaps more so than at home in England, but Germany has a repertory programme when it comes to staging plays. In Britain, what is staged seems more random, so it seems that the revival of Kane's plays, which took place after her death, was a direct result of her death. Would the revival have taken place if she had not died?

About the aftermath of Kane's death, Annabelle Singer mentions that the reception of her work varied, and mainly split into two different camps. One camp 'saw her whole body of work in light of her suicide, the other mourned her death, but declined to even try to connect her death and her work.' [19] She continues with saying that 'the first group reinterpreted Kane's work in light of her mental anguish' and that 'the second group insisted on seeing Kane's work outside of the frame of mental disease and suicide.'

These groups have been solidly maintained after Kane's death, and the division between those who insists on authorial absence and those who recognize the expected connection between author and work will, it seems, always remain. However, I often fail to understand why it has to be one or the other. Why can not a piece of work be rooted in an author's life and still sustain its artistic value? Why do we elevate art above life? Why are biographical facts never viewed as enriching to the work, but always considered to bereave it of its artistic value?

Although it may be tempting to think that Kane's suicide alone produced a shift in the reception of her work, Graham Saunders claims in his article that it was with the play *Crave*,

[18] Mcdonald, 'They never got her,' *The Guardian* online ed., Feb 28, 1999.
[19] Annabelle Singer, 'Don't want to be this: The Elusive Sarah Kane,' *TDR: The Drama Review: a Journal for Performance Studies*, 48:2 (Summer, 2004), 160.

which differed from her previous work in its richness of poetical language and lack of violence, that the shift in reception began: 'By the time of *Crave* (1998), Kane's oeuvre was no longer considered a "nauseating dog's breakfast", but had shifted to being "a uniquely experimental voice".'[20] Saunders continues to note that:

> Since her death, Kane's impact and status as a dramatist has also been subject to extreme pronouncements, veering from outright acclamation to curt dismissal. […] Trying to critically assess Kane's theatrical legacy is difficult for several reasons. Firstly, as we have seen, the practice of critics (including myself) and theatre practitioners' opinions about Kane's work at their worst slowly erase any original intent by placing it below their own agenda – something which has been all too easy to achieve now that Kane is no longer able to explain such intent. There is the controversial beginning to her career, which produces the tendency to mythologize, and its painful end, which generates idle biographical speculation.[21]

What Saunders notes here is that speculation and scrutiny, though often unfortunate or unjustified, has been a fact in the aftermath of Kane's death, and that when a writer is no longer alive and able to defend his or her intentions, there may be unleashed a multitude of assumptions that no one in reality can argue for or against. However, Wimsatt and Beardsley would argue that that 'the evaluation of the work of art remains public; the work is measured against something outside the author.'[22] With this in mind, can Saunders be right in speculating that the interpretation of Kane's work would in fact be any different if she was still able to defend them? Was she ever really able to defend them in the first place? Is the author needed in order to explain that the author is not needed?

As I noted earlier, Kane herself did not believe in giving explanations to her work, she strongly encouraged the idea that the work should be able to speak for itself. How is it then that we can assume that the reception of her work would be any different if she had not committed suicide? Some would claim that the answer is that we can assume this based on past examples,

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[20] Graham Saunders, '"Just a Word on a Page and There is the Drama; "Sarah Kane's Theatrical Legacy,' *Contemporary Theatre Review: An International Journal*, 13:1 (Feb, 2003), 97.
[21] Saunders, '"Just a Word on a Page and there is the Drama;" Sarah Kane's Theatrical Legacy,' 98.
[22] W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy' in Burke (ed.), *Authorship,* p. 95.

such as the case of Sylvia Plath, whose popularity grew considerably after she had committed suicide. People began reading her work not only for its literary value, but for the sake of harvesting biographical facts.

Sylvia Plath's biography played a significant role in popularization of her work. This point is mentioned in Marianne Egeland's *Hvem bestemmer over livet*: 'After the cause of death was known, suicide as a poetical topic as well as personal tragedy was more often drawn into the discussion. The high price which the poetry seemingly claimed, gave them electrifying additional meanings.'[23] We can with little hesitation relate this statement to the case of Sarah Kane. However, though there are biographical similarities in these two cases, they also differ greatly in that the interest in Plath's work took a dramatic turn upwards after her death, while Kane's plays held considerable importance and influence also during her life.

The most prominent similarity between Plath and Kane is that they both have had their work read as records of their lives. Although some claim that to read the works of these two authors as merely biographical recollections of their mental states tend to be reductive in terms of the work's artistic value. Thus, this act undermines the author as an artist. This is an important point, and also one which Egeland brings up in her book: 'A defence – strategy that consists of depicting Sylvia Plath as a lost and innocent victim, means that a resourceful woman is close to being declared incapable and not considered fully responsible for her own actions. Another consequence is that her authorship is reduced and adjusted.'[24] What Egeland is stating is that by putting more emphasis on biography, the *work* is often adjusted so that it corresponds with the author's life. Also, by assuming that the illness to a large extent is the cause for the author's

[23] See Marianne Egeland, *Hvem bestemmer over livet? Biografien som historisk og litterær genre* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2000), p. 200, 'Etter at dødsårsaken ble mer kjent, trekkes selvmord som dikterisk emne og personlig tragedie oftere inn i diskusjonen. Den høye prisen diktene syntes å være betalt med, ga dem en elektrifiserende tilleggsbetydning.'

[24] See Egeland, *Hvem bestemmer over livet? Biografien som historisk og litterær genre*, p. 200, 'En forsvarsstrategi som går ut på å fremstille Sylvia Plath som uskyldig, fortapt offer, innebærer at en ressurssterk kvinne nærmest blir umyndiggjort i og med at hun ikke anses som fullt ansvarlig for sine handlinger. En annen konsekvens er at forfatterskapet blir redusert og tilpasset.'

writing, we rob the author of his or her authority. The author is not credited for his or her intelligence or creativity, but rather their work is 'explained' by the fact that they had a mental illness. Even if this point is made in relation to Sylvia Plath, we can again easily draw parallels to Kane. But how can anyone really know what is going on inside another person's head anyway, sane or not?

It is also worth mentioning the importance of the genre that Kane chose to write in, and the significance that it had for the reception of her work. Drama produces a sense of immediacy that few other media can give, something which Kane also was well aware of:

> 'It's always been the form I loved most because it's live. There's always going to be a relationship between the material and the audience that you don't really get with a film. I mean with the film I wrote, *Skin*, people can walk out or change channels or whatever, it doesn't make any difference to the performance. But with *Blasted*, when people got up and walked out it was actually part of the whole experience of it. And I like that, it's a completely reciprocal relationship between the play and the audience.'[25]

Kane's choice of drama as her genre was no coincidence. But there seem to other reasons for this choice also, as Dan Rebellato notes in an article in the *New Theatre Quarterly* dating back to 1999: 'Sarah initially wanted to direct, but discovering that there weren't enough plays she liked, decided to write her own.'[26] Kane also acted for a while, which would come in handy when she later had to step into a role as one of the main characters in her own play *Cleansed*. Acknowledging these determining factors, it is safe to say that the dominating reason why she chose drama was that this particular media is able to reach people in a different way than other cultural media, for example novels. When you read a novel and do not like it, you can put it down; when you watch a play and do not like it, you can walk out, but that demands actual physical action, and is something that is a seemingly rare thing to do. It becomes a difference of active versus passive.

[25] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 13.
[26] Dan Rebellato, 'Sarah Kane: An appreciation,' *New Theatre Quarterly*, 15:3 (Aug, 1999), 280.

My main aim with this thesis is to explore the significance of an author's biography and how the reception of a work often depend on how much knowledge the reader has of the author. I will also look at the phenomenon of how the reception of works written by authors who have committed suicide, at one point or another changes drastically, and separates itself from works by authors who have not. Moreover, I want to illuminate the fact that as soon as a text is socialized, the author is no longer able to control the text. The text now belongs to the reader. While this is the case, the work should in no way be seen as any less significant or lose its artistic value. Another issue which I wish to address is the author's and the media's responsibility in creating a myth around a deceased author, and also how confusing it is for the readers when authors insist on being absent from their work, and then turn around and make statements about their lives in relation to their work. Which 'camp' should we belong to, and more: what does it matter? I intend to relate this topic to the reception to the works of Sarah Kane, as well as give individual interpretations of three of her plays: *Cleansed*, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*. The reason why I have chosen these three plays is that I take these to harbour most instances of what may be seen as biographical references. They are also the three plays which are most connected to each other in terms of themes and form.

Kane blessed by being at the right place at the right time, since she was writing and staging plays at a time when the British Theatre scene was mourning the death of the rebel dramatist John Osbourne, and thus searching for a new angry voice to step on to the stage. Kane became one of those voices, and along with other young artists there emerged a new sub-genre that came to be called 'In-Yer-Face Theatre'.

Sierz say that: 'A writer such as the late Sarah Kane had a similar effect on British culture as John Osborne had in an earlier era.' Although Kane resented being put into any category of new, young writers, it is important to note that this rise of new voices, and the audience's hunger for them, contributed to Kane's success, and was also partly the reason why *Blasted* was

considered to have 'the same kind of impact as *Look Back in Anger*' had on its audience in its time[27] *Blasted* was the most controversial play that had come out of British Theatre for a long time, but who is to say that all eyes and ears would have been on it had it not been searched for?

In order to fully understand Kane's place in the world of Drama, and the impact she created, it is crucial that we understand what the widely used term 'In-Yer-Face Theatre' actually refers to, what they brought to the stage, and how they changed the definitions of what theatre really was.

In-Yer-Face Theatre and its effect.

Aleks Sierz's book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* ends with something George Bernard Shaw said about Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* namely that 'its real strength will be what it does in the world.'[28] The American critic Dan Rebellato wrote something similar about Sarah Kane: that despite of her short career it was one 'which has enriched British Playwriting more powerfully and enduringly than any other writer of her generation.'[29] Both these playwrights created something that lasted longer than they did.

First and foremost it is vital to realise that the emergence of the 'new brutalists,' as media frequently labelled them, and their thought-provoking plays in the nineties, was not only due to how the British drama scene was in search of new voices, but it was also due to a critique of the 'old plays', and of naturalism. It was furthermore a reaction to the disturbing world situation that dominated the newscasts at the time. Ken Urban notes in his essay 'An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane,' that these young writers often took similar views on politics and aesthetics. They were also writing in the aftermath of the Thatcher-reign, the fall of the Berlin wall, the plunge of communism and the war in former Yugoslavia. As Urban notes: 'Without a

[27] Aleks Sierz, 'Still In-Yer-Face? Towards a Critique and a Summation,' *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18:1 (Feb, 2002), pp. 17-24, 18.
[28] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, p. 251.
[29] Rebellato. 'Sarah Kane: An Appreciation,' 281.

doubt, this political backdrop feeds into the aesthetic sensibilities of the playwriting twenty-nothings and provides the spark for their theatrical innovations.'[30]

It is apparent that the new writers were critical of the politics of the times and the political consensus in society, but what really made them stand out was the way in which they managed to make the political personal. They seized the big issues and distilled them into something people could relate to, be that a hotel room in Leeds, as in Kane's *Blasted*, or a cyber conversation as in Patrick Marber's *Closer*. But what else did the new innovators of In-Yer-Face Theatre stand for? Here are some typical aspects of this theatre form, as outlined in Sierz's article:[31]

- **Extreme Living**. This has to do with the way sex, violence and life in general is depicted on stage. The actors explore extreme aspects of human behaviour, be that rape, incest, brutal murder, or obsessive love. The 'rawness of tone' corresponds to the rawness of action.
- **Breaking taboos**. I will return to this point later, exemplifying how this is done. It often goes hand in hand with using the most vulgar language in order to show the audience certain aspects of life which they may prefer not to see. It means making the personal and private public in order to test people's 'boundaries of acceptability.'
- **Experientialism**. This is the main aesthetic for those involved with this kind of theatre. The prevalent cruelty of the form can cause such an impact on the audience that they may feel like they actually experienced what happened on stage. Sierz points out that this was easier to create for young writers since they often had their plays performed in small theatres where the actors were in close proximity to the audience. He adds that In-Yer-Face theatre instead of putting issues up for debate, 'imposes its views on the audience.'

[30] Ken Urban, 'An Ethics Of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane,' *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 23:3 (Sept, 2001), 39.
[31] The following points are to be found in Sierz' article 'Still In-Yer-Face?' 19.

I mentioned earlier that Kane deliberately chose to write within the dramatic form because she felt it was the only form alive and direct enough, and that by writing within that form, she would rarely be exposed to threats of censorship, as for instance she would with films. Sierz also sheds light on the issue of censorship by stating that 'theatre in Britain is technically uncensored, so everything is allowed. You can stage things that would be impossible to show on television or in the cinema – this gives writers the chance to explore the darkest sides of the human psyche without compromise.'[32] It is important to realize that this to a large extent contributed to the reception and occasionally brutal critique of Kane's plays. It also means that during the course of writing she had the opportunity to be freely creative, and to express what she wanted to express, without having to consider the factor of direct censorship. Kane wanted to create a reaction in people and the best place she could do that was in the theatre, where she could achieve a direct connection with the audience. She was also a writer who was entirely committed to telling the truth, despite whatever cost or whatever reaction that would cause.

One given truth, however, is people's natural need for logic. Our search for logic can at times seem obsessive, and our search for explanations and context is both a blessing and a curse. Either way, it is always there. Therefore, Kane's audience unremittingly searched for the truth behind the plays, the truth about the author, the truth about Sarah Kane. Kane however, was on the whole determined to keep her own truth to herself, though no doubt realizing the problems that this would entail: a multitude of assumptions, and an audience forensically scanning her work for answers.

In an article from the *New Theatre Quarterly* in 1999, Rebellato shares his appreciation of Kane and her career, while also criticizing the critics and the readers who could not or would not separate her life from her work. He writes that 'Kane was patronised, vilified, hounded by

[32] Aleks Sierz, 'Still In-Yer-Face?' 19.

reporters, who preferred to believe that the events in the play [*Blasted*] were the product of a young woman's mind rather than the daily experience of tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslims.'[33] What he is talking about here is the speculation that followed after Kane's first play, when assumptions about her mental health somewhat overshadowed the fact that the theme of *Blasted* was inspired by images of the war in Bosnia. In Rebellato's opinion, Kane's message was undermined by speculations that were irrelevant to the public, and they should instead have focused on what was happening in the world, and how her work reflected that. Kane herself also felt that it was important not to shut our eyes to what was going on outside of our sheltered lives, and that art has the opportunity to open our eyes:

> If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future, because experience engraves lessons on our hearts through suffering, whereas speculation leaves us untouched . . . It's crucial to chronicle and commit to memory events never experienced – in order to avoid them happening. I'd rather risk an overdose in the theatre than in life.[34]

Rebellato further states his concern that people will not fully understand the relevance and immediacy of Kane's work and claims that 'it would be a tragedy if her death were to become an easy way of not confronting the seriousness of her work.'[35]

After the effects and the media speculation around *Blasted,* however, the audience were already speculating if there were elements of truth in the rumours about Kane's life, and once you know something this will naturally colour your horizon of expectation, regardless of how objective you may try to be.

Therefore, her third play *Cleansed* had to be judged accordingly, in the aftermath of the shock-fest of *Blasted*, and with the knowledge that the writer had a mental illness lurking beneath the surface. That said, it is important to remember that any assumptions we make about Kane's inner life can only ever be assumptions. In Kane's case the assumptions may seem

[33] Rebellato, 'Sarah Kane: An Appreciation,' 280.
[34] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 22.
[35] Rebellato, 'Sarah Kane: An Appreciation,' 281.

overwhelmingly accurate, but since she is no longer alive, what we can learn about her is through her work and through what she or others have stated in interviews etc. As her fellow playwright and friend Mark Ravenhill at one point observed: 'Myth, biography and gossip crowd around the work of any artist, clouding our view, but maybe no one more so at the moment than Sarah Kane. We don't know her. We never knew her. Let's look at her work.'[36]

[36] Mark Ravenhill, 'Suicide Art? She's better than that,' *The Guardian* Online ed., October 12, 2005, see: http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1589951,00.html.

CLEANSED

> *'I don't find my plays depressing or lacking in hope. But then I am someone whose favourite band is Joy Division because I find their songs uplifting. To create something beautiful about despair, or out of a feeling of despair, is for me the most hopeful, life-affirming thing a person can do.'*[37]

With *Cleansed* Kane started something which would continue in her following plays, ending with *4.48 Psychosis* – the move towards the abstract and the development of a poetic imagery in her drama. On the first page of the play, there is a note made by the author, a dedication to the patients and staff of ES3, the hospital ward where she was admitted during periods of depression. If it is noticed, the dedication sets the mood for the play, because it makes the reader instantly aware of, if he or she did not know beforehand, one particular aspect of Kane's biography, an aspect that is exceptionally difficult to ignore when reading what follows.

Cleansed consists of twenty scenes and four main storylines in which six characters and their relationships with each other are explored. The characters are vague. They are not described with attributes or personal traits, and what we learn about them come through what they say and do. Consequently, it becomes apparent that it is not the characters themselves who are important, but rather what they represent in their relationships, with their emotions, and through their representations of various aspects of humanity. They are, as Susannah Clapp has stated in 'not so much characters as states of being.'[38]

This move away from characters and towards something more abstract makes it easier to compare Kane's plays with poetry, and perhaps especially the nightmare-like poetry of Sylvia Plath. There are a number of similarities between these two authors. And in both cases their popularity, to a certain extent, depended on factors outside of their actual work. These common factors, however, should in no way overshadow these authors' talents, but they should be included in the equation. One factor is the time and context in which their work was published,

[37] Kane in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2000), p. 91.
[38] Susannah Clapp in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 88.

Kane at a time when British Theatre was stalemate and hungry for something new and original – Plath at the very beginning of the women's movement in the U.S., with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* at the forefront. The feminists adopted Plath as an example of female suppression; her work was given attention, canonized and put on school and university syllabuses. Typically, one of Plath's biographers claims to have been introduced to Plath's work while studying at an American University in the seventies.[39]

Although the time of publication had a significant role in the increase of interest in both Kane and Plath's work, there is another dominant contributing factor here which can not be ignored – that of their mental illnesses, which in both cases ended in fatality. It seems safe to say in regard to both of these women writers that their biographies are to a large extent a contributing factor to their popularity. Marianne Egeland also mentions that people's fascination with death, and the fact that those who die young are often considered martyrs, also have to be taken into account.

A second factor is the way both Plath's and Kane's work may be interpreted as confessional writing. Plath was often seen as a follower of Robert Lowell, who was one of the pioneers of so-called confessional writing. Kane's work can also easily be interpreted as being confessional, as there is much of her own experience in her work. Seeing that they both were troubled by depression, their work may to some, and not least to hostile critics, appear to be merely records of their inner lives, without further artistic quality. However, this assumption, as I mentioned earlier, tend to overshadow the work's literary quality as well as the author's authority. On the other hand, who's to say that an author who writes from his or her own experience is not also able to write something with literary quality? Especially, if they by doing this manage to create something that is easily associable for the reader.

[39] See Marianne Egeland, *Sylvia Plath* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2004), p. 8.

There seem to be few similarities between Plath and Kane when it comes to artistic *intentions*. Plath is said to have been writing while always catering to a strong craving for having things publicized and for making money. It seems she also saw it as a necessity to be 'normal' and to be accepted: 'Sylvia's strategy was always to do better than was required. Because she was "different," it was essential to appear more than usual "normal."'[40] Kane, however, had a more idealistic view of her work. She wanted to stir something in people, to create something original. It also seems that Plath used her personal experiences in her writing for the sake of making it better, and further, to make it sell better: 'In her writing, Sylvia made the most of every scrap of personal experience she could use for literary material.'[41] Contrarily, I do not believe that Kane ever had a clear intention of using her own experiences in order to write better, or to make her work further accepted by others. I think Kane did this because she did not have any other choice. I think that the world in which she called 'hell' was too all-consuming not also to consume her writing, which was a large part of her life.

A third similarity is how Plath's poems and Kane's plays seem to be dominated by the same darkness. This has most likely to do with the fact that they were both suffering from sporadic periods of depression. But while Plath often makes use of metaphors, Kane's language differs in that it is more direct and less obviously elaborate. The images they paint, however, are similarly heavy with grief, loss, an inability to communicate and death. I must nevertheless insist that Kane's material is, though this may not always be evident, much more optimistic and hopeful than Plath's, whose imagery, though beautiful, bears witness of an author who had lost her faith in love and life entirely.

The final and the strongest similarity between Plath and Kane is the way they died and what followed in the aftermath of their deaths. Their most striking correspondence is their suicides, and how that affected the receptions of their work. When an author takes his or her own

[40] Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 2.
[41] Ibid, p. 3.

life, it is as if they leave behind a mystery that can never be solved. Consequently, this mystery becomes obsessively interesting to the audience, the fans, and last but not least the critics. Thus, after both these writers' suicides, something changed in the public's relation to them – Plath's poems sold more copies than before, and there was a revival of Kane's plays. However, as I mentioned earlier, the similarities between Kane and Plath go beyond the way they died. What followed up until their suicide is also comparable: the premonitions, their ability to describe their situations in a way that makes the reader gasp for breath, and the portrayal of the nightmare-like existence where you do not know if you are awake or asleep.

Between Extremes

In a way similar to the nightmare-like feeling you get from Sylvia Plath's poems, *Cleansed* takes the nightmare to the extreme, and although Kane herself felt the play to be hopeful, most critics and members of the audience fastened on the imagery of brutal violence, letting that single aspect overshadow the rest of the play. Certainly, the play is brimming with violence, but it also contains a message of hope, the search for truth and hope for undying love. The latter illustrates a fact Kane herself established, namely that she was in love while writing the play: 'When I was working on *Cleansed* I was in a very extreme state. I was going through the most appalling depression, but on the other hand I was so completely and utterly in love that those things didn't seem to be any contradiction at all. These days it does. So sometimes when I read *Cleansed* it's like it's by another writer. I now could not write it.'[42]

Inspired by Roland Barthes *A Lover's Discourse,* and acknowledging that intense love comes with an intense feeling of happiness, Kane also recognizes the opposite side of it, the intense pain, desperation or depression. There is unfortunately a counter pole of extremity to be reckoned with here, and it seems that the one cannot exist without the other. Extreme feelings of

[42] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 92.

happiness and fulfilment are dependent on the opposites: extreme feelings of desolation and fear of loss. This brings with it a genuine insecurity and trepidation of losing that other person that you have allowed yourself to be lost in, ending up with nothing. This point is probably most evident in one of the main storylines in the play, namely that of Grace/Graham, carrying with it strong echoes of the sibling drama in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, as several critics have pointed out. It also resembles the nightmare we encounter in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land.'[43] In all these works the characters are often situated between two extreme poles, and the sinister landscapes they are in create a similar sinister feeling of despair and desolation.

Cleansed is set in a University, perhaps illustrating both the importance of education but also the often disregarded effect of it, especially in terms of reading literature. When studying and analyzing literature one often allows oneself to let technicalities overshadow the other effects of the writing. We tend to be attentive to form, or metaphors or similes to such an extent that we overlook how the piece of work actually makes us feel. We neglect what emotions the novel, poem or play stir up in us and what we can thus learn about ourselves. This can also be translated to Kane, who often felt the critics did wrong in letting the violence in her plays overshadow other themes, such as hope and truth and love. Kane commented on this fact in relation to one of the scenes in *Cleansed*, where Tinker cuts off Carl's hands: 'It's not about the actual chop. It's about that person who can no longer express love with his hands, and what does that mean?'[44]

As I mentioned above, the play, and especially the scenes with Grace/Graham are constantly oscillating between two extremes: Complete bliss and complete desolation. This is perhaps best illustrated with the line 'love me or kill me, Graham,' in the play's sixth scene (120). It is also, however, visible on other accounts, for instance in the first scene where Grace and Graham meet,

[43] See for example Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 87.
[44] Kane in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 89.

when Grace slaps Graham carelessly across the face only to hug and kiss him seconds later. A few scenes after this, Graham blissfully smells a sunflower that has grown out of the ground following their lovemaking. The next scene in which Graham and Grace are alone together, Grace is beaten and raped, and all the help Graham is capable of giving her is to teach her to block out the pain. This knowledge of blocking things out, which he passes on to Grace, has a dual effect. On the one hand it saves her life, and on the other hand it sentences her to an existence of numbness. This is another example of the correlation that I noted earlier, that there can be no darkness without light and vice versa, and that to be able to feel joy and happiness one must also be able to feel pain.

The fact that one extremity often depends on an opposite extremity can also be related to the use of anti-depressants. People who are medicated are seldom able to feel pain, but rarely able to feel joy either. They become numb to all sensations and senses, so what is then the point in living? This is the question that dominates this play, and which Kane also returns to in her later plays. This is mainly, I suspect, because she too was given a choice of using anti-depressants during her ill periods.

In *Cleansed*, the characters have not yet succumbed to a state of indifference, which they will in Kane's later plays, but they are still experiencing extreme states. The shift between two extreme states is strongly reminiscent of dreaming, when in one second you can recognize yourself in the dream, and your surroundings and the action is relatively familiar, and in the next you find yourself in a state of confusion about who you are and where you are. The nightmare begins when you are no longer able to recognize yourself in the mirror. Is it a dream or is it reality?

This technique of blurriness is also made use of in 'The Waste Land,' where memory and reality collide in order to create a dreamlike atmosphere. Consider for example verse five: 'What the thunder said,' where there is rock, dry grass, no water and only the promise of decay: 'who is the third who always walks beside you? When I count, there are only you and I together/But

when I look ahead up the white road/There is always another one walking beside you/Gliding wrapt in brown mantle, hooded/I do not know whether a man or a woman- but who is that on the other side of you?'[45]

In *Cleansed*, the 'other' that Eliot is talking about, would be the character of Tinker, perpetually lingering in the background, promising demise. I have chosen not to discuss Tinker more thoroughly, although he probably is the most important character in the play. He bears a resemblance to Touchstone in Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* the character that the other characters revolve around. He is a character of action, a character without which we would not come to know the other characters, thus I have decided only to attend to him in relation to the other characters. Tinker in a way dominates the play's themes, and while he is testing the other characters' morality and commitment to truth and love, we as observers are tested not only as to boundaries, but also as to our sympathy and our ability to understand the different sides of the human psyche. Tinker creates hell, but his message is also quite beautiful and perhaps conveyed most clearly in the Carl/Rod story: that there can be no love without truth, and that false promises or love based on superficial means is not love, and that people must be cleansed of such apprehensions. *Cleansed'*s depth is not conveyed so much through each character but rather in the space between them, in their relationships to each other and in their conversations. The characters themselves, their gender, their names are less important than their actions, or more – their inability to act. The effects that Tinker creates in relation to where we direct or sympathy in the play, however, deserves some attention.

[45] T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land,' in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* [1940] (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 37.

Sympathy for the Devil

There are four focal storylines in *Cleansed*, each one representing a taboo issue, an unwelcome or unfathomable aspect of society. Kane's portrayal of her characters create a similar effect in the reader/viewer that one gets from watching or reading for example Patrick Marber's play *Closer*. A feeling of confusion and disillusionment occur as the character you initially sympathized with suddenly turns around and proves that he or she no longer deserves our sympathy. The characters are constantly fluctuating between good and bad, moral and immoral, indicating that in real life people are not black or white, but that most of us are situated in that grey area of in between. Consider for example the way you at first sympathize with Carl as he declares his undying love for his lover, only later to choose to sacrifice the life of his lover in order to spare his own. When succumbed to pressure, Carl's love for Rod is clearly inferior to his own love for himself.

Another shift in sympathy occurs gradually in the play in relation to above-mentioned character of Tinker, the ostensible anti-Christ who is the main perpetrator within the university, the evil doctor whose main aim appears to be to destroy love in any shape or form. The fact that he is the perpetrator relates to the fact I noted earlier, namely that in a university we often let technical issues overshadow emotional ones. Tinker, as we know, is named after the *Daily Mail* critic who harshly criticised *Blasted. His* crime was that he let the play's violence overshadow the other themes, and that he did not recognize what the violence represented.

We discover that the character of Tinker is also capable of good things, however, and that he is in a profound sense only searching for love and respect. His method may of course be questioned, but his needs are ultimately human and possible to relate to.

How can one say this? Well, first of all he commits a wholly unselfish act when he operates on Grace and aids her in her transition to become her brother. Grace's motif is to resurrect her dead brother so that she can become whole again. Tinker does this for Grace's sake alone, since we come to know during the course of the play that he is in fact in love with Grace.

In allowing her to become male, however, he is removing all potentiality for him to ever be with her, since Tinker could never be with a man. We learn this from the way he treats the homosexual couple in the story. So, by giving Grace everything she wants, he is sacrificing everything he wants.

Another way in which one may develop some sympathy for Tinker is the way in which he, when he has given up the pursuit of Grace, attempts to find love in the only place one ordinarily does not look for love, namely with a prostitute. His attempts to project Grace's personality (and name) onto the prostitute are pathetic, but the prostitute seems to understand Tinker's frustration, and she accepts the personality he has created for her. Although this may seem like the perfect ending for Tinker, he is aware that it is not real, and that is why he is unable to consummate their love making.

The way in which Kane produces confusion in the reader/viewer in terms of his or her sympathy towards the characters, can in a way be seen as a deliberate attempt to illustrate the duality in people, and how our ideas of morality, of what is accepted and what is not, play on our consciousness. This also ties in with the representation of the instances in *Cleansed* which may be considered taboo issues in our society, the things we dare not speak out about because they are too difficult to accept or too far removed from our own experience. The relationships we find in *Cleansed* each represent such instances.

Relationships

Grace/Graham represents incestuous love, the sexual relationship that perhaps seldom, but nevertheless at times occurs between brother and sister, and that often carry connotations of abuse. In this case, though, the love seems too be heartfelt and real. There is no doubt that Graham and Grace love each other, but they take their love to such an extreme that they eventually melt into one person. The gender confusion that this relationship reveals, reminds me to a certain extent of

the character of Tiresias in T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land.' Whereas the Grace/Graham relationship represents gender confusion in *Cleansed*, the character of Tiresias represents gender-confusion in 'The Waste Land.' He is the most important character in the poem, and both sexes meet in him ('throbbing between two lives'). Although he is blind, he is the only one able to see the whole meaning of the poem.[46] He therefore alludes to a sort of universality, and to someone who is able to see both sides of any story.

Grace/Graham they represent the same universality as Eliot's Tiresias does. This evaporation of gender boundaries opens for further interpretations of the texts, as well as, one might say, as towards assumptions about the author's sexuality. What we learn from Kane's plays, however, is that she rarely took any interest in the division of the sexes. Man or female, straight or gay, was not important. What was important is that we are all people and we all harbour a common need to be loved and to feel safe. Nevertheless, there were assumptions regarding Kane's sexuality, assumptions made stronger by descriptions like 'she was gay and she loved men,'[47] or passages in her work such as this one in *Crave*:

B: Are you a lesbian
M: Oh please.
B: I thought that might be why you don't have children.
A: Why?
M: I never met a man I trusted. (161)

What this passage represents is the necessity to view people as people, in spite of gender, and that there are attributes like kindness, empathy or intelligence that we should consider when judging a person – not their sex or sexual inclination. Kane seems to be of the opinion that love knows no gender, only people. This fact is something many people disregard when it comes to homosexuality, and it is what leads to prejudices and the perpetual belief that homosexual love is all about the sex, and less about real people and love.

[46] See footnotes to Eliot, 'The Waste Land' in *The Waste Land*, p. 42.
[47] See Dominic Dromgoole, *The Full Room* (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 164.

The relationship between Carl and Rod may be seen to portray that stereotype. Homosexuality, though increasingly accepted in our culture, still unfortunately carry residual negative connotations. The negative view often derives from strong religious beliefs, something which I think Kane also wished to illustrate, taking into consideration her own troubled attitude towards religion and her evangelical background. What Kane managed to do, however, in portraying the relationship between Carl and Rod, was to put the emphasis on their love, and how their promise of love in actuality is not enough when put to the test. By emphasising their love, their situation becomes more general, and they could equally be a man and a woman. Kane makes the reader/audience member look at the human aspect in their situation, rather than the fact that they are homosexuals. On the other hand, she also manages to address the stereotype by having that exact couple prove the validity of their love. This serves perhaps as a comment on the fact that homosexuals often have to defend their love, *because* of society's generalization of homosexual relationships.

The relationship between Tinker and The Woman is most likely included in order to elucidate Tinker's obsession with Grace, his need to be loved and accepted, and the relationship between a prostitute and her customer. The woman has no real purpose other than that of being a reflection of Tinker and of the broken power balance between them. She is not given a name, perhaps indicating her limited relevance for the play's progression. Considering the fact that she is a prostitute, an object of desire, one can easily conclude that she is there to help shed light on another taboo aspect of society, namely of how women are often reduced to sexual objects whose main purpose is to cater to the man. She is the anonymous woman, who can only be seen as a reflection of the man. She represents the crooked balance occurring as a result of a relationship not based on equal terms, a relationship in which the one part is present only because the other part requires her to be.

One might argue, though, that Tinker and the woman in actuality are only trading favours. She gives him a much needed illusion of being desired, and he in turn gives her money for her to do so. The only problem is that she is at the same time enabling her own anonymity, her objectification, and thus also the objectification of the female body by condoning this trade of favours.

The storyline of Tinker and the woman is actually quite central to understanding *Cleansed,* and it contains almost all of the main themes: identity struggle, loss of self, taboo love, how love can be an illusion or a state of mind, female objectification and the struggle to maintain an equal power balance in any relationship.

Another relationship founded on an imbalance of power is that between Robin and Grace. Robin, however, wants and needs to be in a relationship as the inferior part. He needs to be taken care of and nurtured in a way, and that is why he feels it is necessary for Grace to be his mother or his girlfriend.

The relationship between Grace and Robin resembles that of both a mother and a son and that of a student and a teacher, and in a way the two are often connected to each other. It confronts the feelings that may arise towards someone that one looks up to and admires, and how admiration and gratitude may often be mistaken for erotic love. Robin first tells Grace that he would like her to be his mother, but later he wants her to be his girlfriend, disregarding the significant age difference between them. Grace teaches Robin to read and write and also leads him to a certain understanding of himself and his surroundings.

Enlightenment or education is usually considered to be a good thing, and something to be expected in a university, but in this case it is fatal. When Robin is able to read, he finally understands the prison sentence that Tinker has given him, and how many years of imprisonment he has left. The devastation this knowledge leads to makes him take his own life. This is not only powerful in that it represents the fact that knowledge can help you but also break you, but it is

also evidently based on a true story that Kane had read about, namely that of a black eighteen-year-old man who was imprisoned on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela. He was told in writing that he would be there for forty-five years, but because he was illiterate he did not understand. That is, not until some other prisoners taught him to read, write and count. He then realized the magnitude of his sentence and hung himself.[48] The fact that Kane actually issued an explanatory note telling her readers that this is something that truly happened, shows that she knew how biographical facts may encourage human emotions, interests, and identification. In this case she even took advantage of it.

This, along with Tinker alluding to the *Daily Mail* critic who slaughtered Kane's debut play, our awareness of the probability that Kane was gay corresponding with her recurring emphasis on the irrelevance of gender, and the fact that the play is dedicated to the staff at the hospital ward she was admitted to, enables and in part encourages her audience to draw parallels to Kane's own life. It is naïve to think that it would not. However, that did not stop Kane from incorporating such evidence into her work, or to push the boundaries in terms of what people expected a theatre play to be. The violence in her plays is not only seen through action, but also communicated through words. The words are often equally powerful to the decapitation of a limb. As I mentioned earlier, this was one of the traits of the 'In-Yer-Face Theatre,' namely that the rawness of action corresponds with the rawness of tone.

A Nightmare on Stage

The emotional impact of watching someone's hand get cut off or someone being raped on stage is daunting, and the 'new brutalists,' among them Sarah Kane, were acutely aware of that fact. They exploited it in order to encourage a change in people. In order to make people understand that the violence was not just something far removed that could not happen anywhere else, just as it had

[48] See Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 117.

happened in Bosnia or the former Yugoslavia. In response to the media coverage and the controversy that concerned the violence in her plays, Kane pointed out that 'the thing that shocks me the most is that the media seem to have been more upset by the representation of violence, than violence itself.'[49] She was surprised when people criticised her plays for displaying grotesque violence on stage, when all you could do was just switch on the news and you would see the same thing, only for real. The only thing she did was to take big issues, make them small and personal, and stick it in people's faces:

> We live in a world of rampant cruelty, waste and injustice; we see it in every place, at every level. It's a given […] Yet in theatre, this didn't stop wealthy, healthy, middle-class folk looking at some inane subject like pensions or architecture or spying or newspapers and finding more rottenness than in any Denmark, more pain than in any holocaust, more apocalypse than any Hiroshima.[50]

What Kane did is inevitably the same as many filmmakers do when creating a blockbuster action movie; she drew on real wartime events, and cruelty that could be found in our vicinity. But the theatre has the potential of creating a deeper impact because the audience is not watching some Hollywood actress on a screen, but a person of flesh and blood right in front of you. This is why people speculated about the sanity of the person behind these plays, not because they were too violent, but because the impact they created was too much to handle for the audience. Consequently, the *London Evening Standard* noted after *Blasted* was in production that 'so far eight people have walked out of performances.'[51]

In the theatre there is no optional pause button, you simply have no control over what is happening. You cannot be far removed. American critic Ken Urban discusses this fact in his essay 'An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane', where he recalls his emotional confusion after seeing *Blasted* at The Royal Court Theatre:

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[49] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face-Theatre*, p. 97.
[50] Saunders, p. 14.
[51] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 97.

> As I left the Royal Court Theatre following the performance, I really didn't have any words to express what I had just undergone. Later that evening, it suddenly hit me: watching the news on TV before bed, I was suddenly overcome with tears. Kane was able to use the theatre in a manner that was distinctly visceral, making intense use of the experience of being in the theatre. But at the same time, she knew the stage is always, as Beckett taught us, a place of thought, and this made her push the boundaries.[52]

After the at times fiercely hostile reviews from *Blasted*, Kane continued to disregard the speculations about her mental health, and continue to write what she wanted to write, regardless of the media frenzy this might cause. She neither believed in censoring herself or that she had any responsibility towards her audience: 'My only responsibility as a writer is to the truth, however unpleasant that may be. I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don't believe there's such a thing. When people talk about me as a writer, that's what I am, and that's how I want my work to be judged – on it's quality, not on the basis of my age, gender, class, sexuality or age.'[53]

Regardless of how the author wants his or her work to be interpreted, however, it is not simply for him or her to decide. A writer who creates such disturbing images as Kane did can not expect his or her person to be overlooked. Moreover, as soon as the text is socialised, as it enters the public sphere and is encountered by readers and audience, it takes on a life of its own. It becomes public property. I do not believe that the author has any more control over his text and how it is interpreted than an artist has over his painting in its completion. Whatever intentions the artist had will dissolve if the public do not wish to preserve them.

The way in which the author's biography often functions as a catalyst for interpreting his or her work is far from inexplicable; it is, as I said earlier, in the nature of human beings to want to explain everything, to want answers, to see things in context. This is not a new phenomenon, and

[52] Ken Urban, 'An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane,' *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 23:3 (Sept, 2001), 46
[53] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 30.

authors in the past have also been aware of how biography may inflict on the reader's interpretations of their work, which has led to more than one occurrence of letter-burning or refusing successors to co-operate with biographers. Egeland mentions such examples in her study, examples that I think clearly illustrate the way authors engage in a seemingly already lost battle of attempting to remain in control of their biography, so that they can keep it from poisoning the interpretations of their work.

Egeland notes that Alfred Tennyson gave his son a mission to create an adequate enough biography of him in order to keep others from creating one themselves. Thomas Hardy wrote his own story so that his wife could publish it after his death, and J. D. Salinger refused to give interviews, and even went to court in order to keep a lost letter from becoming material for biography. In addition to this, poets such as T. S. Eliot, William Somerset Maugham and W. H. Auden forbid their families and guardians to help future biographers.[54] These days it is almost comical to think of the lengths they went to in order to remain in control, because what we know from looking at examples such as Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath or even Salinger is that they never could be. There is also the issue, when speaking about control in this regard, of pseudonyms, which Kane herself made use of when she wrote *Crave.* This was a decision in line with the long tradition of women writing under pseudonyms in order for their work to carry the same weight as men, but also with an author passionately wanting to separate who she was from what she did.

The fictional biography attached to the pseudonym Kane decided to use during the first presentation of *Crave*, however, was also partly rooted in her own life. This is only one example of how Kane contributed to the confusion around herself and her work. While encouraging a separation between her work and her biography, she also, perhaps purposelessly, strengthened the connection between them. We repeatedly encounter instances of this kind, for example through statements made in interviews or in her decision to step into the role of Grace.

[54] Marianne Egeland, *Hvem bestemmer over livet? Biografien som historisk og litterær genre* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2000), p. 142.

Saving Grace

The fact that Kane had to step into the role as Grace in some performances of *Cleansed* due to an actress' illness must surely have done something to the reception of the play. Both for Sarah herself and for the audience, who were now faced with the difficult task of not only separating the words from the author, but also from the character of Grace. This must have been difficult, especially now that the author herself was actually in that exact role, playing Grace. Kane stated that this even interfered with her own interpretation of the play, especially in terms of understanding what the actors had to accomplish when acting in it: 'I can't talk about all acting but what *Cleansed* asked for was extreme simplicity and that's a very difficult thing to do when you're standing in front of hundred people with no clothes on.'[55]

Kane's decision to act in her own play was an act of boldness, because with this decision she risked obliterating the dividing line between her life and her work even more, a line she had tried so hard to preserve even. Given that it was only for a limited number of appearances, it nevertheless must have had an effect on how the audience interpreted the play. If Kane is right in saying that need is the ultimate thing that drives people, the people in her audience would be no exceptions.[56] They are driven by a need to interpret her plays as autobiographical, and they were driven by a need to understand why a girl in her twenties writes in a way that makes your stomach turn, and wonder if she might be mentally unstable.

The assumptions about Kane's person were visible already from the time following *Blasted*, when the controversy and speculation regarding the author's background began. People were questioning what inspired someone to write something so violent and disturbing.

In his famous article on the 'death of the author' Roland Barthes wrote that 'when the author is found, the text is explained – victory to the critic.'[57]Considering how Kane refused to provide

[55] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 88.
[56] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 115.
[57]Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in Sean Burke (ed.), *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 129.

explanations to her plays, why would she put herself in the position she did when she accepted to play Grace? People were already assuming, after her previous plays, that Kane's person was connected to her work. This had happened regardless of how persistently she tried to separate the two, and of how she encouraged independent interpretations, hoping that everyone would be able to relate to her characters in one way or another. Why would she then take a step in the opposite direction and make it even harder for the audience to separate her person from her work?

In eliminating the link between herself and the play, namely by taking up the position of the actor, she herself was forced to communicate her own message. By doing so she was not only diminishing the universality she once encouraged, but almost condoning the public's scrutiny of her. How could someone who was so devoted to free individual interpretations fail to consider how her decision to play Grace would affect people's reactions to the play? How would the fact that (assuming the audience knew it was the author who played Grace) the author herself was standing in front of them on a stage, speaking the lines she had written and that some would have thought autobiographical, affect the individual members of the audience? It must have been a near- impossible task to separate the author from the work, when the author was in front of you *in* her work.

After making this decision to substitute in the role of Grace, Kane presented her next play under a pseudonym, attempting to bring back the distance she had so recently erased. But yet another instance that would contribute to lessen the distance between Kane and her work was her move away from fixed and stable characters.

Away from Characters

A consequence of Kane's move away from traditional notions of character is that the concerns of her plays become increasingly accessible and more universal. When the characters do not have established personalities, it is easier to imagine that they could represent anyone. I believe this to be one of the reasons why Kane decided to take her work in this direction, since she has stated more than one time that it is important to consider what the plays tell us about ourselves. Our reaction is a contributing factor for the plays to come full circle. However, this technique of eradicating the character traits can also do Kane disfavours, because by removing the process of establishing the character, the plays become more prone to being read in the context of Kane's life. By, obliterating the characters she opened the door for the audience to peak into her own life. Since the characters are not able to stand on their own, it is easier to back them up by assuming that their relevance lies in something outside the play. And this relevance often became Kane. This does not apply to *Cleansed* to such an extent as to her last two plays, but there are certainly lines in *Cleansed* too that it is easy to read in light of her mental state:

> Think about getting up it's pointless.
> Think about eating it's pointless.
> Think about dressing it's pointless.
> Think about speaking it's pointless
> Think about dying only it's totally fucking pointless. (150)

This passage, which is strikingly poetic, may be said to illustrate typical traits of depression.

A standard definition of depression is: 'depression is a mental state in which you are sad and feel that you cannot enjoy anything, because your situation is so difficult and unpleasant.'[58] The feeling of meaninglessness and indifference as to being dead or alive is something many people struggle with, and the person, or character speaking here could easily be one of those people. However, the author, the person who formulated these sentences, also suffered from

[58] *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners,* 3rd ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 409.

depression. The elusiveness of the character and the knowledge of the author's illness make it that much easier to see the passage above as biographical.

But why would interpreting it in this way be wrong? Does the possibility that Kane was alluding to her own experiences in any way diminish the poetic quality and beauty of the passage? Does it necessarily suggest that it is not significant and relevant to other people? Artists and writers draw their own experiences into their work all the time, when you think about it – what else is there to write about? An argument might be that one can write from the imagination or from memory of something one has read, but is that not also experiences? Does the potentiality of a complicated biography cancel out the creative mind? I do not see why it has to be one or the other, why the two can not co-exist, and why Kane as a person is not considered as important as her work. Whatever happened to 'life imitating Art imitating life?' I do not see why literary theory and criticism should be considered more significant than people. Why does it seem like a crime to identify traits of the author's life in his or her work? Why should the work be superior to the author? These are a number of questions that are difficult to answer, mostly because there is valid evidence for both arguments. Rather than attempting to answer either or, I shall attempt further to shed light on the various aspects of Kane's plays that contribute to the easily made connections between her work and her life, and also Kane's own part in this.

Kane's next play, *Crave* takes the vagueness in characterisation further. Consequently, it is also easier to relate this play to Kane's life. Kane's representation of the absence of characters, of the inability to communicate, and of a generally discouraged attitude towards life serve to illuminate an author who was losing her faith in her surroundings:

> *Cleansed*, says Kane, was written by someone who believed utterly in the power of love. My next play, *Crave*, was written at a time when I thought the world was a pretty grim place. Now, every time, I let my cat out I think some vivisectionist is going to put washing powder in its eyes. That indicates a general depression about the world, don't you think?[59]

[59] Kane in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 117.

CRAVE

'And if this makes no sense,
then you understand perfectly' [60]

Sarah Kane's third play *Crave* is a puzzle. Here, the author plays with the reader/viewer's mind as they encounter the multiple interpretational layers. The way in which the reader confusingly sways between thinking 'is this beautiful and poetic, or just depressingly nauseating' indicates an author who elegantly managed to locate the fine line in between what people accept and what they do not. One of the characters in *Crave* says: 'you get mixed messages because I have mixed feelings' (165), and it becomes clear that the play is a product of a confused or at least deeply ambivalent mind. This confusion is transmitted to the reader. Just as in *Cleansed* we encounter a question of where to direct our sympathy.

Crave, even more than *Cleansed*, brings to the surface the fine line between fiction and biography. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle revisit the idea about the 'death of the author,' and remind us that a lot has been said and written on the subject over the past few decades. Moreover, they say, that 'this idea refers not to the empirical or literal death of a given author, but to the fact that, in a radical sense, the author is absent from the text.'[61] In Kane's case, the author seems, paradoxically, to have become exceedingly present in the text after her real death. What happens to the phrase 'death of the author' when the author appears to be more alive in the text after he or she is dead? An author who has made a heroic attempt to separate him or herself from the text while living, devalue that attempt when dying, especially when committing suicide. If the author distances him or herself from his or her work while living, the readers will put him or her back into it when he or she is dead. It is a futile task, to completely separate the text and the

[60] *Crave*, p. 159.
[61] Andrew Bennett, Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 21.

creator of it. Still, many have tried, and Sarah Kane made her last attempt, however seriously it ought to be taken, by presenting *Crave* under the pseudonym of Marie Kelvedon.

The pseudonym was an endeavour made in order to create some distance between herself and her writing, and also to try to influence the expectations of the audience in relation to a new Sarah Kane – play. She even went so far as to create a fictional biography for 'Marie,' which was included in the play's pamphlet:

> 'Marie Kelvedon is twenty-five. She grew up in Germany in British Forces accommodation and returned to Britain at sixteen to complete her schooling. She was sent down from St. Hilda's college, Oxford, after her first term, for an act of unspeakable Dadaism in the college dining hall. She has had her short stories published in various literary magazines and has a volume of poems *Onzuiver* ("impure") published in Belgium and Holland. Her Edinburgh Fringe Festival debut was in 1996, a spontaneous happening through a serving hatch to an audience of one. Since leaving Holloway she had worked as a mini-cab driver, a roadie with the Manic Street Preachers and as a continuity announcer for BBC Radio World Service. She now lives in Cambridgeshire with her cat, Grotowski.[62]

This fictional biography not only illustrates Kane's sense of humour, but it also shows Kane's awareness of people's increasing emphasis on biography. It is ironic then, that 'Marie's' biography also includes elements of Kane's life. The insertion of the fictional biography into the pamphlet also indirectly questions the audience about how significant an author's life is for them. If the play had indeed been written by Marie Kelvedon, a somewhat mundane woman who was, as some may say, normal, and not by Sarah Kane, would it have been received in the same way? Would people have gone to see the play?

Sylvia Plath also published her factional biography *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. Her reason for doing so, however, was different from Kane's. For Plath, it was

[62] Annabelle Singer, 'Don't Want to Be This: The Elusive Sarah Kane,' *TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal for Performance Studies*, 48:2 (Summer, 2004), 167.

the protection of her family and friends, many of whom she had portrayed in the book, that made her publish under a different name. For Kane, it was her own biographical self and the connotations that were attached to her name that she wanted to escape.

In comparison to the historical tradition of women writers' use of pseudonyms, ranging from the Brontë sisters to Sylvia Plath, Kane's attempt was less serious: 'In one way she [Sarah] thought it was funny. Marie was her middle name, Kelvedon was a town near where she was born. But in another way, it was deadly serious. She had spent a lot of time shaking off the negative effects of *Blasted*. She really wanted to write something that could be judged for what it was, rather than for the fact that it had been written by Sarah Kane.[63]

In an issue of the Norwegian literary journal *Vagant,* Per Buvik accuses Kane of not having enough distance to her work: 'To portray a flat and unbearable reality just as flat and unbearable as it is, without any distance, is not art.'[64] The pseudonym was Kane's attempt at creating this distance, but the play and its disturbed characters inevitably exposed much of what she had been trying to hide.

Bennett and Royle use John Keats as an example on how an author's biography may influence reading: 'The fact that we know, (assuming that we do), that John Keats died of tuberculosis at the tragically early age of 25, cannot but affect the way we read those prophetically poignant lines from "Ode to a nightingale."'[65] In the same way will the knowledge that Kane was suffering from depression affect the way we read certain lines from *Crave,* such as: 'Depression's inadequate. A full scale emotional collapse is the minimum required to justify letting everyone down' (173), or the painfully ironic 'I write the truth and it kills me' (184), a poignant line which I will explore in more depth later. Both these lines bear witness to an author with a dark but highly developed sense of humour, one who was realistic and who had come to

[63] Vicky Featherstone in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 102.
[64] Per Buvik, 'Psykose for åpen scene,' *Vagant*, vol. 1, (2001), 26. 'Å fremstille en platt og uutholdelig virkelighet akkurat så platt og uutholdelig som den er, uten avstand, er ikke kunst.'
[65] Bennett and Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, p. 24.

terms with her own illness, and also one who was aware of how the theatre audience and readers would connect this to her life. This does not, however, indicate someone who was presumably passionately trying to hide who she was. Since by including lines like these which may be read as highly biographical, she is in a way playing with the audience or the reader's mind, and with their perception of who she was.

With regards to reading texts as biographical, Bennett and Royle observe that: 'the relationship between life and work is highly complex and highly mediated, and a key to the authorial life is by no means necessarily a key to the literary text.'[66] It is of course important to remember this. The artistic qualities and the poeticism of *Crave* cannot be grasped simply by creating links to various aspects of Kane's life. The text has value outside the context of the author's life, and disregarding that fact would be to reduce the text to the status of entrances in a diary. However, sometimes, the text seems to have such clear references to its author, that an attempt to escape the context seems impossible. In Kane's case, *Crave,* and her following play *4.48 Psychosis*, challenge such attempts.

Crave is poetic, incredibly romantic, nauseating and disturbing. Kane questions some of the ideas that we usually take for granted: is love always beautiful, or does it depend on the form it takes or is given? Is memory constant and true? Are we ever able to escape our pasts and/or our fates? Critics and readers have interpreted *Crave* in various ways. Behind the various interpretations there seem to be a common denominator (though for some one which is resisted): the play's author is to a larger extent present in the work than she has been in previous plays. In this chapter I will mainly focus on the impact that Kane's move away from characters created in terms of the reception of the play. I will also give my interpretation of the play, and of what the play's 'characters' represent, and put emphasis on the aspects of it that is easily connected to the

[66] Bennett and Royle*, Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory,* p. 25.

author's life. I will also devote attention to what lies behind this play, Kane's inspirations and her sources of allusion.

Kane's Characters/Kane's Character

The move towards abstract characters which Kane began with *Cleansed*, continues in her next play. There are no fixed characters in *Crave*, or at least not characters in the conventional definition of the word. Instead there are four letters, C, M, B and A, acting (or should I say speaking) out the play. The play consists almost entirely of speech, and of what some would argue is *dialogue* which is interrupted by long sequences of monologues and rhythmic noises. I would argue, however, that what the characters utter are mostly *monologues*, and that most of the time we do not really know for sure who the characters are speaking to. The direction of the monologues depends largely on the choices of the director. The absence of scenes and the vague structure of the play welcome individual interpretation to a larger extent than in Kane's previous work. But how easy is it to resist the temptation of connecting the character's lines with Kane's life as they one by one utter words that we know are directly linked to her life? 'ES3' is the hospital section where Kane spent the last days of her life. The line 'I was blessed with the mark of Cain' echoes a pun on her last name, and also mirrors her evangelical background.[67]

If the characters in the play had established personalities of their own, the reception of the play would be different. If they had names, or if the setting of the play had been specified, the play would exist at a certain distance from the life of the author. This would be a distance that would perhaps inhibit critical statements such as *Crave* is 'an ideal candidate for biographical criticism.'[68]

It is also likely that it is easier to fully understand the play (if that is really possible) by reading it, rather than seeing it performed. A reader is his or her own director. Whether or not the

[67] See Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 119.
[68] Ibid, p. 119.

reader chooses to believe that A's lines, for instance, are directed to someone or that he is talking to himself, can make all the difference in the world for the interpretation. For the readers, the play is first and foremost staged in the mind. When reading, there are no actors present to make *their* interpretations of the play, interpretations that could colour *your* perceptions of the play. The staging in the mind inevitably also closes the distance between the reader and the author, and, as a result, the risk of making biographical assumptions becomes stronger.

In relation to Sylvia Plath, Marianne Egeland mentions that 'the fact that she [Plath] used more biographical material than what is common, does not mean that there is a simple correspondence between biography and work. A poet's life can not be explained or incorporated through the work.'[69] However, as I have pointed out in chapter one, the significant difference between Plath and Kane is that Plath had no problem admitting that she purposely used her own experiences in her writing. We see this from, for example, her comments following the publication of the seemingly autobiographical *The Bell Jar*: 'What I've done . . . is to throw together events from my own life and fictionalize them in order to give colour – it is in reality written in order to sell, but I believe it will demonstrate how isolated a person feels when experiencing a breakdown.'[70]

Kane, on the other hand, encouraged her readers and the theatre audience to judge her work on its own terms, therefore she would never have made any statement similar to this one from Plath. This does not mean that Kane did not include biographical traits and incidents in her writing, only that she would never admit to it. But while Kane encouraged the autonomy of her texts, she also made public statements about their themes and representation, knowing how that would affect people's reception. In Saunders' book, Kane makes a point of the fact that she did not want to explain her texts: 'Either I explain everything, which means going into enormous

[69] Marianne Egeland, *Sylvia Plath* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2004), p. 157.
[70] Sylvia Plath in Egeland, *Sylvia Plath*, p. 147. 'Det jeg har gjort [. . .] er å kaste sammen hendelser fra mitt eget liv og fiksjonalisere dem for å gi farge – den er i virkeligheten skrevet for å selge, men jeg tror den vil vise hvor isolert en person føler seg når han gjennomgår et sammebrudd.' My translation.

detail about my own life, which I didn't want to do, or I explain nothing.'[71] Here, it seems that Kane had made her choice to not explain, but, as we can see from other non-fictional texts, she often did the complete opposite.

Concurrent with Kane's insistence on the autonomy of her texts, she repeatedly explained their themes, or touched on how close they were to her, and therefore on how difficult they were to write.[72] Kane's double ness lies in the way she on one hand denied that her work was about her, and then used the media in order to explain how her work was *not* about her, while weaving in information about herself, so that her work could not possibly be seen apart from her. She tried, perhaps not on purpose, to resign her reader's to the 'double contract', which I discussed in the introduction.

Kane has to a certain extent explained what *Crave's* characters represent, and the rest of their potentiality in terms of interpretation is really for the reader/viewer to realize. On the following pages I will give my interpretation of the different characters in terms of what they represent, as to whether they represent, and to what extent they represent aspects of the author's life.

Many, including Saunders, Sierz and Singer, have stated that the characters of *Crave* have or have had some sort of relationship with each other. While this is a valid interpretation, and one that I am clearly able to recognize, my own perspective is slightly different. I think it may be too easy to make the characters co-dependant. There are several ways in which it is possible to interpret the character's interaction with each other, whether it is that they have been in romantic relationships with one another, that some of them are family members, or that they are simply separate individuals. These interpretive possibilities underline the universal qualities of the play.

Furthermore, as I have already mentioned, the interpretation of someone who has read the play will undoubtedly be different from someone who has seen the play performed. An act as

[71] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 104.
[72] See Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p.117.

simple as a head turning to one of the other characters while speaking, or C twitching during A's monologue, can make all the difference. For the reader, *Crave* is merely a series of words, of literary references, and, for some: biographical recordings. While the actors may contribute to an enhanced understanding of the play, Sierz mentions that reading between the lines is also often required to make more sense of it: 'if you *read Crave* carefully, it slowly becomes clear that most lines have more than one meaning, depending on which character you imagine is being addressed.'[73] Thus, a lot of the meaning or the logic of the play is created or decided by the director. If one reads it, one the other hand, one is freer to make up one's own mind about this. Subsequently, seeing the play and reading the play will induce different interpretations.

Sierz adds that there are several strategies to consider when reading the play, and in coherence with the human need for rationality, the most common approach is likely to connect the characters to each other. But this play demands more than rational thought in order to come to life. Here it is not enough to paint by numbers, and in my opinion what connects them is their experiences and their ability to understand and relate to each other. In fact their strongest common denominator is perhaps the mind they all derive from – the mind of Sarah Kane.

A, B, C, M and everything in between

Kane provided the audience with some useful tools in order to enhance their understanding of *Crave*, for example by indicating what the 'characters' A, B, C and M represented:

> To me A was always an older man. M was always an older woman. B was always a younger man and C was always a young woman . . . A, B, C and M do have specific meanings which I am prepared to tell you. A is many things which is the Author, Abuser (because they are the same thing Author and Abuser); Aleister – as in Aleister Crowley who wrote some interesting books . . . and Antichrist. My brother came up with Arse-Hole which I thought was quite good. It was also the actor who I originally wrote it for who's called Andrew.

[73] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 118. My emphasis.

> M was simply Mother, B was Boy and C was child, but I didn't want to write those things down because then I thought they'd get fixed in those things forever and nothing would ever change.[74]

This statement, which ultimately breaks with Kane's wish for individual interpretation, aids the reader in his or her interpretation, although attentive readers will come to know something about who the letters represent anyhow, through the text. We get to know that C is a child and a female because of the way she speaks about being sexually abused by a family member, and how she is awaiting her monthly period. We learn that B is a boy when he expresses his desire to be seduced by an older woman, who is M – craving to become a mother.

A is the most complicated of the characters, and also the one who represents most, something Kane herself also mentioned. A can both stand for Author and Abuser. Kane plays with the notion of the Author, which etymologically derives from the word Authority, indicating that both authority and a position as the author can easily be abused. Author and abuser can also stand for two aspects of Sarah Kane. She is the author, and able to abuse her position as such, if she imposes her view, intentions or interpretations of her work on her readers. A third aspect appears when we consider Kane's illness and failed suicide attempt, namely that the author here was also her own abuser. The most striking interpretation, I think, is the one which exists on a more meta-level. The Author has the ability to abuse his or her power by mixing biographical facts with fiction, or, as is the case with Kane, by confusing the audience by making in cohesive statements about her authorial intentions. This may be seen as an abuse of her status and of her authority as an author.

Moreover, Kane mentioned that A could stand for Anti-Christ, which denotes another aspect of her. Not in the historical meaning of the word, but in that she at an early age denied Christ in rejecting Christianity:

[74] Kane in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 104.

> I committed the unforgivable sin, which is knowing that God is real and consciously deciding to reject Him. I knew a lot of Christians who I thought were fundamentally bad people and a lot of non-Christians who I thought were utterly beautiful, and I couldn't' understand that, so I made a conscious decision to reject God and gradually my belief subsided. According to the Bible, I am now utterly damned.[75]

We can see from this that religion, although complicated, was a prominent part of Kane's early life. Her religious background also manifests itself in a large number of references from *The Book of Revelations*. This may seem far-fetched, but if one connects the fact that A is the Anti-Christ, A's monologues about the loss of a love, and also measure in the fact that Kane had recently gone through a break up, one cannot help but conclude that she was drawing on her own life. Kane's artistry of course, meant that she gave A's beautiful monologues double meanings, so that they could *also* be seen as removed from her self. By indicating that A also is a paedophile she manages to distance A from the Author. The oscillation between personal and general is something that is recurrent in Kane's oeuvre. Her work is clearly both a representation of herself, and of something *more* than herself.

Examples of the duality Kane portrayed in order to confront the duality in people, can be seen most clearly in A's monologue. By stating or indicating that A supposedly is a paedophile addressing his speech to a child (which some claim is C), she questions the *real* beauty of the speech. Is love always beautiful? Does our perception of love change with the surrounding circumstances? Or are the words not equally beautiful regardless of whom they are intended for?

I can easily acknowledge the way critics have often linked the characters together, most often in twos – C and A, B and M. C is seemingly the child that A, the paedophile, is directing his love towards, and A is what C is trying to escape, an image of her abuser. What is conspicuous here is that we think we get to know parts of C's story from certain anecdotes that A

[75] Singer, 'Don't Want to Be This,' 141.

tells us. All we know from C's own mouth is that she holds a grudge towards her mother for not leaving her father, who she claims she watched beat her mother with a walking stick. The line 'still sleeping with daddy' (180) also does little to disprove her alleged sexual abuse. But it is only after A's line that we begin to realize who her abuser is: 'In a lay-by on the motorway going out of the city, or maybe in, depending on which way you look, a small dark girl sits in the passenger seat of a parked car. Her elderly grandfather undoes his trousers and it pops out of his pants, big and purple' (157-158). Following this however, there is a rhythm in the characters' speech that makes it seem like A and C's utterances respond to each other:

C: I feel nothing, nothing. I feel nothing.
A: And when she cries, her father in the back seat says I'm sorry, she's not normally like this.
A: And though she cannot remember she cannot forget.
C: And has been hurtling away from that moment ever since.
A: Tragedy.
A: What do you want?
C: To die.
C: Everywhere I go, I see him. I know the plates, I know the car, does he think I don't know? (158)

These lines, together with C's line at the beginning of the play: 'somewhere outside the city, I told my mother, You're dead to me' (155), do not directly succeed each other, because then it would be too simple to connect the dots, and the play would lose its complexity. But it is not difficult to imagine that these two characters are in fact talking to each other, sometimes past each other. However, even though A's anecdotes seem to be perfectly suitable for C, that does not mean that they are. It is only through what C herself tells us that we can really know. Or, if A represents the Author, does that mean he or she is also the narrator? Does that make him or her omniscient?

M, according to Kane, represents mother. The way in which she constantly worries about time passing by, and how she says 'I want a child,' supports this (157). On my first reading, I

was convinced that these characters were not related to each other, that they did not know each other. I still think that they must mainly be seen as intimately connected to the author, representing aspects of *her* above anything else. But this play has already engendered multiple interpretations, each one almost equally convincing. It is easy to change one's opinion of this play in the process; after all, it is a confusing world we are visiting, created by someone who was mentally ill.

Disregarding the theory that C and A interact and M and B interact, I began considering M as C's mother, and I am convinced that is a valid idea. One can find several arguments in support of this, if one reads C and M's lines on the assumption that they are mother and child. C told her mother outside the city that she was dead to her, and M's line 'I looked for you all over the city' (156) is the first example. C is blaming her mother for allowing her childhood abuse, for not leaving her father, and she is also trying to get away from her mother. But mostly, and most of all, she wishes she could be free from her without losing her entirely.[76] She also says that 'three summers ago I was bereaved. No one died but I lost my mother,' indicating that they no longer are in contact with each other (155), but that she lost a significant part of herself when they parted. M presumably feels some sort of guilt for what has happened to C, and attempts to justify herself in several ways, first with her belief in fate ('everything that happens is supposed to happen' (157)), and then by repeatedly expressing her longing for true love ('if love would come' (160)).Most significant, though, are the ways in which she explains how she always falls for the wrong men, for instance through several utterances such as:

> 'I don't want to be living in a bedsit at sixty, too scared to turn the heater on because I can't pay the bill.'(165)

This indicates the importance she puts on having a husband, any husband, who is able to provide for her.

> 'Where you going who you seeing what you doing.'(179)

[76] 'If I could be free from you without having to lose you.' *Crave*, p. 155.

This line arguably echoes the questions of one of her jealous men, who are desperately trying to control her.

> 'There's something very unflattering about being desired when the other person is so drunk they can't see.'(180)

This indicates her experience(s) with an alcoholic man, and also how desperate she is to be admired and to find true love.

> 'When he's generous, kind, thoughtful and happy. I know he's having an affair.'(182)

This most likely, alludes to a relationship with a cheating man. In addition to this there is repetition of the line which in all probability a therapist has asked her 'do you have difficulty in you relationships with men?' (172) Through this we begin to know who M really is. She is someone craving a child, but she should never have had one, and she is someone her child C is likely to resemble, if what she have come to associate with men does not change. After all, C is already uttering phrases like 'all things to all men' (156).

The idea that M is C's mother is perhaps a valid one, but what happens to that idea when C suddenly says to M 'you could be my mother,' to which M responds 'I'm not your mother' (173)? Another potential interpretation is on offer, namely that M stands for Memory. I noted earlier that the question concerning the truthfulness of our memory is one of the themes of *Crave*. M's lines often reflect what C has experienced, or rather the reason why she had to experience what she did. We see this through M's manifestation of her lack of will power, and her weakness for just the wrong kind of men. Her inability to leave her men, due to fear of being poor and alone, largely contributed to C's abuse. But there is more – M also formulates examples of how our memory often cheats us:

> 'I ran through the poppy field at the back of my grandfather's farm. When I burst in through the kitchen door I saw him sitting with my grandmother on his lap. He kissed her on the lips and caressed her breast. They looked around and saw me, smiling at my confusion. When I related this to my mother more than ten years later she stared at me oddly and said "that didn't happen to you. I happened to me. My father died before you were born. When that happened I was pregnant with you, but I didn't know it until the day of his funeral."'(159)

This shows how easy it is to confuse our own experiences with someone else's, or with a story we create, for instance around a picture we have seen. As time goes by, our memories become more and more vague, and who is to say that what we remember is really what happened? This point is important because all the characters in *Crave* are struggling with their memories, either with confusing or forgetting them, in C's case, or in holding on to them, as in A's case, who is grieving a lost love. When C says that 'we pass these messages' (159), we understand that the issue of memory and truth is pivotal for the understanding of the play. C adds: 'Listen. I am here to remember. I need to . . . remember. I have this grief and I don't know why' (171).

M is there to help C remember, so she can be able to forget, but at the same time, the fact that she is there will make it impossible for C to forget, because M is everything she has been trying to escape. One might connect this to reality and say that if Kane's writing was somewhat confessional, that she did in fact write in order to escape, the transformation of the abstract (her thoughts and experiences) into something tangible (her writing) might have made it impossible for her to escape her existence. In one way, something that is tangible is easier to control, but, in another way, something that is tangible inevitably becomes more real, something you can not escape. And perhaps also something that will end up controlling you.

It is not entirely clear to me how B is connected to the other characters, although critics tend to claim that he is in some sort of a relationship with the older woman M:[77] 'Will you come around and seduce me?' B asks, 'I need to be seduced by an older woman' (158). M answers: 'I am not an older woman' (158).

[77] See for example Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 105.

I am able to recognize that M and B seem to have some sort of interaction with each other, just as M and C, or A and C. In fact, they all appear to be involved in a conversation, reacting to each other's utterances in a seemingly random order. The conversation is chaotic, and they could easily be speaking out into thin air instead, trying to process their pain and memories by expressing them out loud. What they express often seem to be merely memories that have really nothing to do with any of the other characters, and which only sporadically relate to the other person's experience. This relation occurs when they become involved in each other's monologues. This can be illustrated by C's 'You could be my mother,' and M's response 'I'm not your mother' (173). But only a few lines further along in the play C is telling a story from her childhood and mentioning the name 'David,' which is the same name that M has been mentioning on several occasions throughout the play. This again alludes to the idea that there is a connection between them, but it could also mean that C is only rambling, and randomly mentions a name she picked up earlier.

The play could also be interpreted as people talking to a psychologist, answering questions, throwing out emotions and fragmented memories. The possibilities are many. Are they separate from each other, perhaps patients in a psychiatric ward who are speaking in random order, not connected to each other's response? Do they or have they had relationships with each other, or are they all fragments of one schizophrenic mind? Perhaps they are all of these things, and meant to indicate a universality that can only be achieved by accepting all of the potential interpretations.

C, B, M and A are all craving something, as the title of the play indeed suggests. C craves to start a new life ('buy a new tape recorder and blank tapes' (174)), and M wants to shake off her loneliness and find true love ('If only love would come' (166)), B craves, it seems, M, and A craves the retrieval of his lost love, or maybe C. They all crave something, but inevitably, cravings can not always be fulfilled, and there seem to be few solutions for these

characters besides resigning to indifference and the fact that nothing will change. They lose their faith in a better existence, and accept that they can not get what they crave. This, however, means that they have to live a life that has stagnated, therefore they choose to die.

Initially in this part of my discussion, I explained my unwillingness to agree with the critics and accept that these characters are in some way related. However, because the play is as complex as it is, it also demands several different interpretations. The idea that the characters are related to one another in some way or form, may be as valid an idea as the idea that they are not. They might be related, but they may also only be related in the very general sense that they are all human beings, and therefore familiar with each others emotions or traumas. M may be C's mother, but she may also not be. C may be the object of A's affection, but she may also be only an example of a child A could potentially covet, just as this play could be a reflection of Kane or of us. It is human nature, the similarities and differences and the roles we play, that Kane is portraying. She is also touching on how things are dependant on each other and on the surrounding context. The extenuating circumstances for the reader/audience, though, is the knowledge of Kane's split mentality and of how to deal with the fact that A, B, C and M are all, at one point or another, uttering lines that can be traced directly to Kane's life. Furthermore, how does one process that information when the author is strongly negating any connection between her work and her life in one moment, and admitting to it the next?

But *Crave* is not only a biographical text. It is also one that is rich with literary references, and that (to a great extent) honours the particular inspirations which played such major roles in her works.

'And I will show you something different…'[78]

[78] T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* [1940] (London: Faber, 1999), p. 23.

The sentence in the sub-heading is taken from T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land' (1922), one of Kane's main sources for literary allusion in her work. As Eliot notes in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), 'no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.'[79] Kane has repeatedly displayed her relation to her predecessors. In fact, Ingrid Cragie, the actress who played the role of M in both British productions, took note of the many allusions in *Crave,* which included 'the Bible, Camus, Prozac Nation, Buddhism, Chekov, Shakespeare, Herman Hesse, Aleister Crowley, David Edgar.'[80] However, none was more honoured in this respect than Eliot.

'The Waste Land' has a prominent role in *Crave*, and the poem and the play's atmosphere resemble each other. Feelings of being lost, and of losing faith within an unfruitful place that has stagnated, are habitual, and the sentence 'hurry up please, it's time' is skulking in the background in both places. The interpretations of the poem and the play may vary, as Kane seems to encourage some sort of resignation to death, or to demise, while Eliot give the impression of urging an improvement before our environments transform to waste lands. However, there are striking similarities between the poem and the play.

The sentence 'hurry up please, it's time' is related to the mother in Eliot's poem and to M in *Crave.* It indicates in the first instance fruitfulness in a place where nothing else will grow, and in the latter barrenness in a place where there is no hope left. The first mother does not want another child, as she has sacrificed herself already for the ones she has, while M is grieving for not having one. The issue of not having enough time is something that Eliot and Kane both emphasize, but there is an important difference between them with regard to the issue of time as well, as it is expressed in one of Eliot's other famous poems, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1917). The poem begins with a man contemplating some sort of conversation with or

[79] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' reprinted in *Perspecta*, by Yale School of Architecture, vol. 19, (1982), pp. 36-42. 37.
[80] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*,'p. 103.

revelation to his wife, one who seems to think he has all the time in the world: 'And indeed there will be time/to wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"/Time to turn back and descend the stair [. . .] Do I dare disturb the universe?/ In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.'[81] As the protagonist contemplates his move in this poem, in a way often compared to Hamlet, one is reminded of one important difference to Kane: In Kane's work there is an immediacy that leaves no time for considerations. In hindsight it is tempting to attribute this immediacy also to Kane's own life, and to consider indeed how short her life was. On the other hand, what seems to be a sea of time in Eliot's poem is in fact an illusion, since the protagonist shortly after starts thinking about death. This contradicts the preceding passage on how much time there is for 'decisions and revisions.' In Kane, sentences like 'time is passing and I don't have time' (157) emphasize the immediacy of now, of being fixed and being able to go on living. It is ironic then, that regardless of the temporality aspect, the ending of Kane's play and Eliot's poem alludes to the same thing, namely death. In cases, the lingering, the postponement of life leads, to stagnation, which again leads to death.

Another similarity is the point they make about miscommunication. This is not only something that exists in 'The Waste Land', but also in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' The topic of not being able to articulate what you want to say, of not being capable of making oneself understood, appears frequently in Kane:

M: No that's not it,
A: No not at all
B: That is not what I meant at all. (192)

While this is an extract from *Crave*, we see that it bears a clear resemblance to these lines in Eliot's poem: 'If one, settling a pillow by her head, should say: "That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all."'[82] As noted above, the same passage in Eliot, as I understand it, represents a

[81] T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' [1917] in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 4.
[82] Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' in *The Waste Land,* p. 6.

man contemplating a confrontation with his wife. It is a confrontation that could possible alter both their lives, and he is terrified of being misunderstood. Here it indicates a feeling of fear on behalf of the *protagonist* of being misunderstood, but Kane's inclusion of this reference may indicate fear on *her* side of being misinterpreted as an author. This may be her comment on the difficulty of both expressing herself through her work, while also representing a concern that her audience will not be able to separate Sarah Kane, the author, from Sarah Kane, the person. 'That is not what I meant at all' can also be interpreted as an allusion to the intentional fallacy, that the author herself does not know what she means, so how are we supposed to? Perhaps Kane herself felt that she had indeed included a lot of biographical facts in *Crave,* so much in fact that she felt the need to use a pseudonym. There are many recognizable features of the author present in this piece of work, and it is difficult to separate the two, especially when Kane herself makes comments like:

> In some ways for me *Crave* has very fixed and specific meanings in my mind which no one else could ever possibly know unless I told them. For example, who knows what 199714424 (188) means? I'm the only person who knows – and the actors – and I have no intention of telling anyone what it means . . .[83]

'I hate these words that keep me alive
I hate these words that won't let me die.'[84]

This sub-heading is a line which C utters in *Crave*, and I have used it because I think it serves as a good example of how many of C's lines can be interpreted as Sarah Kane's. It has two meanings on two different levels. On the text-internal level, C hates the words because it will not let her forget what she needs to forget. On a text-external level it may be interpreted as a direct concern of Kane's about people's emulation of her person and her work, and about how she as an author has become more important than her work. Moreover, it may equally serve as a comment

[83] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 105.
[84] *Crave,* p. 184.

on people's perceptions of who they thought she was because they connected her to her work, and that because of her work they would always see her as a troubled and controversial writer. Because of what she had created, and because of what people knew about her life, she would never be able to escape. She as an author could never die for the benefit of her work.

In a way similar to the other characters, but to a greater extent, C often delivers lines about instances that are related to Kane's own life. As Victoria Meirik notes: 'Together with A, who is her male opposite, C often quote biographical elements from Kane's own life, the registration number of the hospital, the section she was staying the last years of her life.'[85] Some of the lines in *Crave* sound disturbingly real, and I will point out some of them, only to show how much Kane appears to be, although she insists on her absence, present in this play, and also how infinite the interpretations are because of this.

First of all, there were many assumptions during Kane's life regarding her sexual preferences, something which was noted in my discussion of *Cleansed.* Some of C's utterances may seem to allude to that fact, for example 'My grief has nothing to do with men. I'm having a breakdown because I am going to die' (172). This has a double meaning. One is that we get to know that C has been abused, and consequently has a lack of trust in the opposite sex. Men represent a past problem that still haunts her. They are threats to her person and to the development of her life, as we learn in the utterance 'he's following me' (156). This meaning is on the text-internal level, the meaning that is rooted in the interpretation of the text itself. But on a text-external level, one can draw lines to Kane's assumed sexual orientation. A problem with this is that Kane is said to have loved men, even though she sexually might have preferred women.[86] The second section of that sentence ('I'm having a breakdown because I am going to

[85] Victoria Meirik, 'I crave white and black but my thoughts race in glorious technicolour: om Sarah Kanes forfatterskap og det å iscenesette *Crave*,' *Vagant*, vol. 1, (2001), 18.

[86] Dominic Droomgoole, *The Full Room* (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 164.

die' (172)) can be seen both as C's acknowledgment that life, or life as she knows it, is coming to an end, and of Kane's acknowledgement of life's end, and her reluctance to accept this fate.

A's description of himself is also one that is staggering, and which bears resemblance to the author. Dominic Droomgole said about Kane that 'she was a ferocious vegan who wore leather trousers; she was the most scary owl and the world's sweetest smile; she was gay and she loved men.'[87] Assuming that this is descriptive of Kane, it is difficult not to read A's line without biographical inferences: 'I don't drink. I hate smoking. I'm vegetarian. I don't fuck around. I've never visited a prostitute and I've never had a sexually transmitted disease other than thrush. This does, I'm afraid, make me a rarity, if not unique' (162). It is also, however, tempting to read M's previous line 'This has nothing to do with you'(162), or the frequently occurring 'what's that got to do with anything/what's anything got to do with anything'(163), as a reminder or a warning from Kane to read the work on its own. That her work has nothing to do with her life. Again, the text establishes ambiguity, a double contract.

We are once more faced with the question regarding the validity of the author's intentions, and of whether it is possible to really separate life and work. This question also takes on another dimension when the issue of mental disorder is in the picture. Did Kane's illness prevent her from being consistent about her own involvement in her text? Did her writing during her depressive periods differ from her 'sane' periods? Did the medication have any relevance to her work, and, moreover, is it fair to 'blame' her artistry on an illness?

The line 'I write the truth and it kills me' (184), is an echo of the author, and has little to do with the character of C, as there is no indication elsewhere that C is undertaking the act of writing during the course of the play. But as an echo of Kane it is both chilling and has multiple meanings: 1) That Kane is saying that she, in her work, is writing about her actual life, her own truth. The act of doing this, instead of being a therapeutic act, leads to her demise. However, by

[87] Ibid, p. 164.

stating this she is again eliminating the dividing line between her person and her work, allowing the audience to combine the two, only not completely. Since the statement is included in a piece of fiction, uttered through a character's voice, she is free to say whatever she wants without having to answer to anything. It is not as if she stated this in an interview, so she can easily write it off as merely a part of the play. The only problem is that it does not fit in, as C is only speaking, not writing, at least as far as we know. 2) The second potential meaning is that Kane is indirectly claiming that she is writing the truth, according to what the critics feel is the truth, and that this erases the validity of the real truth, the real Kane. *Their* idea of her, kills her. 3) The third interpretation is that her inclusion of biographical facts in her work, i.e., the truth, ultimately kills her as the author. The author dissolves, as she gives the audience so much material about her life through her work that her life *becomes* her work. Her life becomes fictionalised. Sarah Kane, the author dissolves, and Sarah Kane, the person takes over. This may be Kane's way of acknowledging that to the audience, just as her work does not exist without her, she does not exist without her work.

Another paradox in *Crave* appears in the line 'Why can't anyone make love to me the way I want to be loved?' as if making love and love is the same thing (182). Only for C, who earlier has been abused, has a dysfunctional view on both sex and love, this sentence seems logical. This may be Kane's way of indirectly pointing out the important difference between the two, but also how difficult they are to separate.

'She talks about herself in the third person because the idea of being who she is, of acknowledging that she is herself, is more than her pride can take' (183), is yet another sentence that plays on the issue of the author's biography, and which also reflects the fact that *Crave* was initially presented under a pseudonym in order for Kane to escape the reputation she had acquired after *Blasted*. This line, not so inadvertently, shows an author who is afraid of facing the truth about herself, and who therefore creates a fiction of the truth in order to generate the proper

distance needed in order to avoid facing who she really is. By writing in the third person, similar to writing under a pseudonym, one invents a buffer-zone between oneself and the work.

The road to committing the 'intentional fallacy' is paved with good intentions, and, perhaps even more, of subjective interpretations made on the basis of assumptions about the author's life. Bennett and Royle also revisit new criticism's idea that a piece of work should be read with attention to form, the author's past influences, and placing importance on the words on the page instead of on the author's life.[88] Wimsatt and Beardsley also recognized, as I mentioned earlier, that we can not pin down authorial intention. We can speculate on it, but in the end, we have no solid proof. Language is also an impersonal system that all authors are inevitably a part of. Wimsatt and Beardsley note that 'the work is measured against something outside the author.[89] They go on to claim, however, that intention can indicate what propelled the author to write.[90] But how do we pin down the intention of a mentally disturbed author, whose line between conscious and unconscious may be more blurred than that of seemingly 'normal' people? I cannot prove the truth of Kane's intentions, and do not want to disregard the intentional fallacy. My only aim is to recognize how easy it is to connect Kane's life with her work, and to raise the question of how wrong it really is to do so.

'**There's an end to this thinking**'[91]

The sentence above is taken from *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, a playwright who, in ways similar to Kane, challenged traditional forms and people's notion of what a theatre play should be. The characters in this play are like the characters in *Crave* spiralling into a stagnated existence where waiting is the only thing they can do. A, B, C and M's solution, like Vladimir

[88] Bennett and Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory,* p. 11.
[89] Wimsatt and Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy' in Sean Burke (ed.), *Authorship: From Plato to the Posmodern: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 95.
[90] 'Intention is design or plan in the author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author's attitude towards his work, the way he felt, what made him write,' ibid, p. 90.
[91] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 38.

and Estragon's, depend on something or someone else, something they can not control. All they can hope for is that something will happen so that they can be diverted away from their memory and their thinking.

'At the end of the day it comes back to this' (197) is one of the last lines of *Crave*, after a few very poetic pages where it becomes clear that the characters are resigning. They are resigning to the fact that in order for them to start anew, to 'be free of memory' (198), they have to die. It is the only act that they can control. Meirik portrays the ending as hopeful, one in which the characters feel relief over a release from their past. They gain insight and that there is a transition from darkness to light.[92] Other critics make a point of the fact that this play stands out in Kane's oeuvre, because there is very little violence in it.[93] Kane's comment was that, ceasing to act, succumbing to indifference, is not necessarily better than acting out:

> I actually think *Crave* – where there is no physical violence whatsoever, it's a very silent play – is the most despairing of things I've written so far. At some point somebody says in it, "something has lifted", and from that moment on it becomes apparently more and more hopeful. But actually the characters have all given up. It's the first one of my plays in which people go, "fuck this, I'm out of here." Probably one of my disconnections with *Cleansed* is because it is about continuing to love and how love can save you. Whereas *Crave* is written during a process of ceasing to have faith in love.[94]

As I mentioned earlier, all the characters in this play crave something, suggesting that what we 'most crave may be the same thing that cripples us emotionally,'[95] but in the end they crave nothing. They go from wanting to start a new life, to not wanting to live at all. They stagnate and it all falls to pieces. In a way similar to what Eliot portrayed in 'The Waste Land', there is no will to live left, there is only dry rock, and people 'clutching a fistful of sand.'[96] It is likely that while the rhythm in *Crave* is easier to notice in a performance, reading the play opens for experiencing the poeticism and to read between the lines to a greater extent. Sierz says that 'watching it, you

[92] Meirik, *Vagant*, p. 18.
[93] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 102.
[94] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 108.
[95] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 118.
[96] Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 163.

don't have time to work it out; your mind is simply dazzled by its images and the way its phrases collide, crash and mix.'[97] Passages alluding to Eliot, or biblical references like this one, for example, may be lost in a performance:

> 'Let the day perish in which I was born
> Let the blackness of the night terrify it
> Let the stars of its dawn be dark
> May it not see the eyelids of the morning
> Because it did not shut the door to my mother's womb.'(189)

Arguably, as I have pointed out, readers of the play may be prone to incorporate more of the author into it than those watching it, since the actors create more distance than an encounter with a book. But however abstract or in cohesive *Crave* may seem, it can barely compete with Kane's last play, one which persuaded her brother Simon Kane to state that it is 'about suicidal so it is understandable that some people will interpret the play as a thinly veiled suicide note [. . .] but this simplistic view does both the play and my sister's motivation for writing it an injustice.'[98]

[97] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre,* p.119.
[98] Aleks Sierz, 'Sarah Kane,' taken from Aleks Sierz' web-page about In-Yer-Face Theatre, see: http://www.inyerface-theatre.com/archive7.html.

4.48 PSYCHOSIS

'*After 4.48 I shall not speak again.*'[99]

At the very beginning of Sarah Kane's last play, *4.48 Psychosis*, there is a line which reads 'I have resigned myself to death this year' (208). This line, and its potential meanings, resurfaces again the large number of interpretational layers surrounding this author and her works. The line may be interpreted in several ways: as a general comment on the theme of death, which undoubtedly dominates all of her work, as a statement of how she as an *author* was lost as her *biography* took over, or as a premonition of her suicide. With the second interpretation, I think of how this last play was considered so much drenched in her own personal experiences that it was Kane as a *person* who became the focal point, not Kane as the author of this work. In such perspective 'I have resigned myself to death this year' may be translated as a final acceptance of 'the death of the author.' The interpretation of this line, however, depends to a large extent on the interpreter's knowledge of the author's biography. Since, as I shall return to later, Kane's suicide was given attention in various British newspapers, the audience knew about this tragedy. It occurred shortly before this play was first performed. The line above would therefore most frequently be read as a premonition of her suicide.

This chapter will mainly deal with the issues of form, of different representations of love, and of suicide. Kane's experimentation with form is taken to an extreme in *4.48*, and it is fundamental for the interpretation of the play. Her abandonment of traditional dramatic form and her simultaneous insistence on writing within the dramatic form creates problems in terms of interpretation. Since *4.48*'s script looks more like a long modernist poem than a play, it also becomes easier to connect the words to Sarah Kane.

[99] *4.48 Psychosis*, p. 213.

The different interpretations of love are interesting because the narrowing down that happens in terms of how love is represented seems to correspond with the narrowing in terms of form. As the representation of love develops from extroverted to introverted, form also becomes more narrowed down. As Kane moves into the spheres of her mind, her text resembles more and more a kind of stream of consciousness.

It is most important to comment on suicide because that is what affects our reading of this play the most. This phenomenon, however, is not new, and Kane's case can without difficulty be compared to that of, for example, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

A review of *4.48* in the *The Daily Telegraph* notes that: 'when *4.48 Psychosis* was first performed at the Royal Court last year, Kane's family were anxious that it should not be seen as a suicide note. Yet it is impossible not to view it as a deeply personal howl of pain, a work ripped not just from its author's churning brain, but from the core of her being.'[100] This illustrates how this play was connected to its author even from *before* it was staged. It seems unlikely that anyone interested in seeing Kane's play should not have taken some interest in the myth that surrounded her. Therefore, her family's anxiety about people seeing this as a suicide note, or the insistence of her mediators on concentrating on the artistic quality of the play, were hardly able to keep the audience from having preconceived notions. After all, simply by asking people to disregard Kane's biography, these people may have assisted in placing the focus on exactly that.

David Greig's introduction to *Complete Plays* helps the *reader* to conjure up certain preconceptions of Kane's plays, and, especially, *4.48*. If the reader undertakes the often neglected task of reading the introduction, he or she will come across these lines:

> Towards the end of the summer of 1998 she [Sarah] began to succumb to another depressive episode. It was her experience of this, and the treatments she received for it which formed the material for her next play. A play which is perhaps uniquely painful for the reader in that it appears to have been written in the almost certain knowledge that it

[100] Charles Spencer, 'Sarah Kane's howl of pain is an act of artistic heroism,' *The Daily Telegraph* online ed., see: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2001/05/14/btkane14.xml.

> would be performed posthumously. *4.48 Psychosis* was written throughout the autumn and winter of 1998/99. On 20th February 1999, Kane committed suicide.[101]

By including this in the introduction, Greig influences the reader's expectations and interpretations of the plays that follow. It is typical that after having incorporated these biographical facts about Kane, he continues by encouraging the reader to remember that the play is not solely a biographical text. He also says that 'the challenge for the reader in Kane's last two plays is not to search for the author behind the words, but to freight the plays with our own presence.'[102] Greig possibly felt the need to include the fact that Kane had committed suicide in the introduction in order not to be accused of making this into a taboo. On the other hand, he was most likely aware that this would interfere with the reading of Kane's plays, and therefore he was careful to emphasize that this should be avoided. Greig's intention was, it seems, to stress that the play should be interpreted on its own terms, and not merely in the light of the author's suicide. But what he accomplishes with this is only to put more emphasis on the author's suicide. The effect he produces is exactly the opposite of what he intends because he himself connects the author with the plays, and thus makes it difficult for the reader to separate them. The cause overshadows the effect.

Greig's case serves as a brilliant example of the critics' double approach in regards to Kane. First they acknowledge that her plays are biographical, then they follow this by saying that they should be read in ignorance of that fact.

Greig's introduction inevitably colours the reader's expectations, but what about the people who only saw the play performed? As I mentioned earlier, British newspapers and various theatre journals also devoted a significant amount of attention to Sarah Kane's suicide. According to Aleks Sierz' web page about Sarah Kane, there exists approximately ten obituaries that were

[101] Greig, 'Introduction' to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), p. xv-xvi.
[102] Ibid, p. xviii.

written in various papers about her.[103] If one searches for her on the web, one will get something around two thousand hits. Kane was a public figure, one who was given much attention in the media, from the large debate about the violence of *Blasted*, to her very last play. This means that any audience member who was updated on current events knew that the author of *4.48 Psychosis* had not only committed suicide, but that this was the result of an ongoing struggle with depression.

As noted, Kane's abandonment of dramatic form reaches a climax in her last play, where language becomes the only carrier of meaning. There is close to no action in *4.48*. Neither are there any particular descriptions of how many characters there are or of who is speaking to whom. However, directors and actors have managed to stage the play, so it has obviously transcended the need for logic and conventional form. It is also more poetic than any of her other work, which we can see from passages such as:

> What am I like?
> the child of negation
>
> out of one torture chamber into another
> a vile succession of errors without remission
> every step of the way I've fallen
>
> Despair propels me to suicide
> Anguish for which doctors can find no cure
> Nor care to understand
> I hope you never understand
> Because I like you. (239)

This passage, which in form resembles a poem, serves as only one example of the fact that *4.48* is more poetic and emotionally moving than Kane's previous plays. The line 'despair propels me to suicide' for becomes almost painful to read knowing about the author's suicide. This text may also be evidence that *4.48* was Kane's attempt at trying to explain to us who she was. The line 'I hope you never understand, because I like you,' however, represents an inclination on Kane's

[103] The selected obituaries that Sierz has mentioned were mainly included in well-known newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Observer*, *The Herald Tribune*, *The Independent* and *The Scotsman*.

side that no one should have to go through what she did, that in order to understand her experience, one has to experience it for oneself, which is something she would not wish for anyone. That fact, though, hardly stops anyone from trying.

This is a difficult play to interpret without considering the circumstances, but the beauty of *4.48*, although about death, cannot be appreciated because of death. This time, what came out of the literal death of *one* author, is something many can identify with, something universal which derived from something painful and private. The following is taken from an interview between Kane's agent, Mel Kenyon and Graham Saunders, where they discuss Kane's last days and her final touches of her last play. It exemplifies how difficult it is to disregard the biographical aspect of a work of art, when the artist has such a strong life story that it almost overshadows his or her creation:

> GS: And finally *4.48 Psychosis* . . .
> MK: Yes. What can I say? She gave me a first draft shortly before she died. She rang and rang the same afternoon and was desperate for notes. A response. It was unlike her to be like that. So I read it overnight and we talked the next day, on a Sunday afternoon. She actually demanded close reading of *4.48.* She wanted notes in a way that she hadn't before. It now makes perfect sense. We looked at some particular passages and then we discussed the role of the doctor and lovers, and the music of the play, and whether the play was for three voices; and the sex, or sense of sex of the characters; and how oblique and obscure she could afford to be and still render the play meaningful to people in general; and how funny she should be and so on. And within days she had made her first suicide attempt. It was on a Tuesday. She left a package, and the play – revised – was in the package. I was asked to go see her in the hospital, and I did, and we laughed about everything; and she was very calm and serene. Two days later she was dead. I then received *4.48* and couldn't read it for a while. When I did, it was very difficult to be objective.[104]

[104] Graham Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 153

'How can I return to form now my formal thought has gone?'[105]

The abandonment of conventional dramatic form *4.48* results in more pressure on the words in order to produce meaning, and it also makes it easier for the reader/audience to connect the play to Kane. This is especially so, since the lack of structure and the chaos in the *play*, may easily be connected to the chaos that had, at this point, come to dominate Kane's *life*. The sub-heading for this section is from the beginning of *4.48 Psychosis*, and it is quite representative of both of these interpretations. Since Kane's mind was no longer structured, how should she be able to write in a structured and tidy manner?

A majority of the interviews Graham Saunders included in *Love Me or Kill Me*, revolve around Kane's abandonment of form. This is perhaps most observable in the conversation between director James Mcdonald and playwright Phyllis Nagy. Mcdonald mentions the extent to which *4.48 Psychosis* represented a move away from form, putting the emphasis even more on the actual words of the text: 'I think that partly in response to the press reception of *Blasted* she wanted to write something that no one could possibly mistake for realism. Then with *Crave* she made another jump forward into an abstraction of character, and with *4.48 Psychosis* she realised she could go further – beyond Beckett even.'[106] In taking the abstraction to the level that she did, Kane forced the text to speak for itself, for the words on the page to communicate meaning, rather than actions. There is nothing in the play to divert attention away from the words, whether they are read or spoken. There are no interfering characters, and hardly any action to cause digressions. The language alone, and what that unveils, is what is important.

In a review of James Mcdonald's production, William McEvoy notes that 'unlike the physical amputations of her earlier play, *Cleansed*, the fragmentation of the self is not enacted on the body, but on language.'[107] In a way, the violent actions in Kane's earlier plays have been

[105] *4.48 Psychosis*, p. 213.
[106] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 121.
[107] William McEvoy, 'Here I am, and there is my body,' *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement* online ed., July 14, 2000, see: http://tls.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,25374-1941420_1,00.html.

replaced by a violent language, violent in the sense that it is challenging and provocative. The deeper meaning can be found in the language.

When the time came for staging the play, Kane was no longer around to incorporate her artistic visions, therefore, more responsibility was on the director. I am understanding of how difficult it must be to write a play out of one person's pain, one mind's mental illness, which, according to Mcdonald was what Kane was doing: 'I think she set out simply to describe her "illness" experientially – and to find a theatrical form which would mirror this experience.'[108] However, some would argue that Kane was no longer writing within any theatrical form, for example Phyllis Nagy:

> 'I think what happens in the last two plays is a movement towards a literary, rather than a purely theatrical form. And by this time, she had clearly abandoned any sense of character. There is only one character in both of those plays, despite the number of voices present. Narrative hasn't been abandoned. There is narrative both in *Crave* and in *4.48 Psychosis*, but there is not really what I would call "character." When you abandon character you abandon drama, so for me she has effectively abandoned drama.'[109]

So why did Kane continue to write in a dramatic form, despite her move towards the abstract and towards poetry? As I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, there was no other form for her. She was a playwright, she wrote plays, and for her there were no other media or art forms that could express what she wanted to express. The immediacy of the theatre was crucial. In the theatre her words came alive, and the audience had to deal with what was there, then and there, without time to think, without time to escape.

Visualising *4.48 Psychosis* is difficult due to a large number of factors. First of all, the lack of definition regarding how many characters are in the play, demands not only a sharp interpretive eye, but also a creative mind. The first visionary was James Mcdonald, who also

[108] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me,* p. 125.
[109] Ibid, p. 159.

directed the first performances of *Blasted* and *Cleansed*. Mcdonald divided the play's voice into three, consisting of two women and one man. Singer describes 'the three voices, in part, representing the division of a person into victim/perpetrator/bystander.'[110] Stage directions and the actors' choices inevitably also influenced the productions. A review of a production by Mcdonald in the USA provides an insight into his vision:

> Staging choices seemed as random as the lines of the text, yet the absence of clear patterns supported the internal exploration of Kane's desperate state of being. Physically the actors engaged in frenetic walking patterns, rocked back and forth silently, stared blankly at the ceiling, and chain-smoked. The dominant physical position of *4.48 Psychosis* was supine-actors either on their backs or face down in utter resignation. [. . .] Cast members Jason Hughes, Marin Ireland and Jo McInnes utilized several tones in their delivery of the text; initial sections of the play were spoken with a sardonic, cynical rejecting quality, as if they were standing outside the text and ridiculing it. The actors delivered much of the text without expression; a sense of flat-line numbness pervaded much of the play, though it may be argued that the nature of the text was best served through that style of speaking.[111]

What interests me the most about this review is the explanation of how the actors delivered the text, sometimes sardonically and cynically, and other times with'flat-line numbness.' I would agree that parts of the play's text is sardonic and cynical, with lines such as 'just a word on the page and there is the drama' (213), which can be seen as Kane's comment on the controversy that seemed to be attached to her name. I can also admit that the play at times seems like it is ridiculing itself, but I can not resign myself to the fact that the voice appears to have given up. Yes, there are lines here that would point to the complete opposite ('This is not a world in which I wish to live' (210) or 'I do not want to live' (207)), but, the voice also utters lines like 'I do not want to die' (207), or 'I have no desire for death, no suicide ever had' (244). To me, this is not a

[110] Annabelle Singer, 'Don't Want to Be This: The Elusive Sarah Kane,' *TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal for Performance Studies*, 48:2 (Summer, 2004), 159

[111] Steve Earnest, '4:48 Psychosis,' Review of a performance of *4.48 Psychosis* directed by James Mcdonald, Royal Court Theatre, at UCLA, California, November 4, 2004. This review was featured in *Theatre Journal*, 57:2 (May, 2005), pp. 298-300.

play whose voice is set on dying, but one that is still trying to find a way out (210 and 214). It is way that, although seemingly intangible, is still being searched for. The voice is looking for a way to make the pain stop, but that does not mean that she wishes to die. If that is the only option, however, the only way out, she will take it.

The fact that this play is only partly negative is something Graham Saunders seems to agree with. He mentions that 'This battle against the passivity of despair is something that distinguishes Kane's drama from the later work of Samuel Beckett.'[112] Moreover, Kane herself has stated that her drama, like all other things, is not black or white, but reflects the duality that exists in all human beings. The lack of a will to live does not necessarily equal a wish to die: 'Kane herself points out that one of the key motivations behind all her drama was to "create something beautiful about despair, or out of a feeling of despair, [which is] for me the most hopeful, life-affirming thing a person can do. Because the expression of that despair is part of the struggle against it, the attempt to negate it."'[113] Should we from this draw the conclusion that Kane's work was her attempt at struggling against her own reality? That this play, written shortly before she died, was her last attempt to find a way out? Perhaps it was, perhaps this was a final attempt at trying to tidy things up, to weigh for or against, to find a conclusion.

There are probably many different possible interpretations of *4.48*, and many ways of staging it. As one reads it, one must necessarily make up one's own mind regarding how many voices or characters are present in order to make some sense of it. Moreover, in the early stages of writing *4.48*, the author herself reveals not only that it was supposed to have a stronger emphasis on language, but also an uncertainty regarding how many voices the play had:

> 'It was strange – when I finished *Crave* I thought I don't know where to go now, because it seemed to me, this has become so minimal and so much about language – where could my writing possibly go? But when I started this new one [*4.48 Psychosis*] just a few weeks ago, I suddenly realised that it goes further. I mean the new one at the moment doesn't even have characters, all

[112] Graham Saunders, '"Just a Word on a Page and there is the Drama;" Sarah Kane's Theatrical Legacy,' *Contemporary Theatre Review: An International Journal*, 13:1 (Feb, 2003), 105.
[113] Ibid, p. 105.

> there is are language and images. I don't even know how many people there are.[114]

This shows that even the author of the play expressed an uncertainty about certain aspects of the play. It is easy to understand the reader/audience's or possibly the director's confusion.

Let me return to the fact that Mcdonald decided to divide the voice into three. To me, there appears to be only two voices present, a patient and a therapist. Half the time the patient is in the moment speaking to the therapist, the other half she is inside her own mind. I can acknowledge, though, that it is easy to view the parts when she is in her own mind as a separate entity, to envision a narrator if you will, and I can certainly understand that it is easier to stage the play this way. But my view derives from the fact that what the 'narrator' – the third voice who is neither the patient nor the therapist, says, is so coherent with what the patient is uttering. For example, after a period of speaking about the loss of love, the patient is faced with questions about her recently cut arm, which seems to me to be an indication of a relationship between the poetry, the long speeches and the actions of the patient, a kind of cause and effect, a transcendence from passivity to action. The pains evoked from memories of a lost love, a feeling of rejection and despair, accumulate in the mind and materialize itself in form of self-mutilation. The physical pain is created in order to take attention away from the mental pain. Furthermore, the physical pain is something tangible that can be controlled and fixed, whereas the mental pain can not. This can be seen as a metaphor for Kane's authorship, where her life and illness represent the mental pain, and her work represents the physical pain. On the text-internal level there are references like: 'some will call this self-indulgence (they are lucky not to know its truth). Some will know the simple fact of pain. This is becoming my normality' (208). On the text-external level, Kane herself was no stranger to the effect of physical pain:

[114] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me,* p. 111.

> 'I just met someone who has taken God knows how many overdoses and has attempted suicide in almost every imaginable way. She has a huge scar round here [points to her throat] and scars round her [points to her wrists]. But actually she's more connected with herself than most people I know. I think in that moment when she slashes herself, when she takes an overdose suddenly she's connected and then wants to live. And so she takes herself to hospital. Her life is an ongoing stream of suicide attempts which she then revokes. And yes, there's something really awful about that but I can understand it very well. It makes sense to me.'[115]

It is a pity then, that if writing was Kane's attempt at controlling her pain, she seems to have failed, since her final resort was to end the life and pain on which her writing was based. In the matter of control, her writing ultimately came to control her life. Her writing is what still controls her life.

Few things can cause as much pain as love. And while Kane's plays underwent a sort of movement to narrowness in terms of form, the theme of love was always maintained. But this aspect, as I mentioned earlier, was also narrowed down from something directed outwards to something that needs to be directed inwards. The representation of love varies in the different plays, and it is not always easily recognized. What *is* apparent though, is that her own experiences are made use of, and that Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* was a major influence.

'**And love, love will tear us apart [. . .] again**.'[116]

The line above is taken from a song by what is supposed to have been Sarah Kane's favourite band, and it serves as an introduction to this section, both because it represents a personal aspect of Kane, and because it indicates her view on love. What most people associate with love is most often something positive, but here it is depicted as something that tears you apart. Kane viewed

[115] Interview with Nils Tabert in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me,* p. 114.
[116] 'Love will tear us apart' by Joy Divison. Kane is said to have claimed this as her favourite band, see Aleks Sierz' article 'Sarah Kane:' 'her favourite band was Joy Division, purveyours of dark and doomy music whose lead singer Ian Curtis committed suicide by hanging.' See http://www.inyerface-theatre.com/archive7.html.

love as something that could be equally destructive as it could be wonderful, and her plays bear witness to that fact.

Kane's plays are all about love in one form or another, but her representation of it often challenges the readers to question their notions of the concept. Kane's portrayal of love is far removed from that we can find in a Brontë or Jane Austen novel. It is the boundaries surrounding love, our taboos, and what makes us tick, that Kane was interested in. *4.48 Psychosis* is at the end of her narrowed-down scale in this respect. It is also about love, but in order to fully understand how the concept of love changed into this final vision in her last play, one has to see it in relation to her previous plays.

This thesis is mainly focused on her last three plays: *Cleansed*, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, because they are connected to each other, and because they seem most intimately connected to the author's biography. The two of Kane's plays that I have chosen not to concentrate on in this thesis are also about love, however. The representation of love in *Blasted* is perhaps the one which is most similar to that of classical love stories: the love between a man and a woman. However, Ian and Cate's story is the love story from hell. They have an abusive relationship where Ian is 'more a torturer than an ex-lover,' and where an imbalance of power leads to terrible things, including a rape.[117] *Phaedra's Love*, based on the Phaedra myth, deals with the sexual tension between Hippolytus and his stepmother, which ultimately ends in a sexual encounter that should never have taken place. Afterwards, Phaedra learns that her stepson has also slept with her daughter, and to diminish her humiliation, she accuses him of rape, while knowing full well that it was not. Ian and Hippolytus are similar in their abusive roles. There is no doubt that Ian rapes Cate, but we are meant to believe that Hippolytus, aware of his stepmother's obsession for him, also bereaves her of something. He abuses her love for him and turns it in to something dirty and incestuous. In a way, this act is also something that is

[117] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me,* p. 44.

debilitating and bereaving, and therefore also a kind of rape. He is subjecting her to a strong form of debasement. Phaedra's love is one that can never flourish, not only because it would be considered incestuous (although they are not related by blood), but because she would be committing adultery with her husband's son. Also, Hippolytus is self-destructive and not able to love himself, let alone love anyone else.

Cleansed takes the issue of incestuous love a bit further, and here it is the love between sister and brother which is represented. Love between siblings may not initially seem to pose any critical questions, but Kane once again takes things to the extreme, and questions the boundaries which we tend to take for granted. Grace and Graham's love goes beyond that of siblings, and into an all-encompassing, passionate love that ultimately ends in them melting into one. The second form of love in this play is found in the homosexual relationship between Rob and Carl. This love is not, as one might assume, included primarily in order to address any issues of gender orientation (at least I do not think it is), but the story of Rob and Carl serves as a comment on the truthfulness of love. This is mainly represented by Carl's pledge to Rod: 'That I'll always love you. That I'll never betray you. That I'll never lie to you' (110). Rod's reply is, justifiably, 'you just have' (110). At first sight, the promise Carl makes to Rod appears to be something every lover wants to hear from his or her loved one, but Kane wants us to question the truthfulness of this. Can anyone make a promise that involves the word 'always' and 'never,' and keep it? Rod doubts Carl's real love for him after having uttered such a promise, and, as it turns out later, his doubts are justified. Carl, like a Judas-like figure, betrays his lover and encourages his torturers to kill Rod in order to spare his own life. The life of the lover he only hours ago professed eternal love to, is suddenly worthless. Rod, however, keeps his promise, because his promise was based on living in the moment, it was not dependent on the future: 'I love you now. I'm with you now. I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you. Now. That's it. No more. Don't make me lie to you' (111).

The love between Tinker and the woman, if it can be called love at all, is quite similar to most of the relationships we encounter in Kane's work. It is love within an unequal power-structure. As I mentioned in the chapter concerning *Cleansed*, Tinker is the dominant part in this relationship, while the woman is his puppet. The woman is not even given a name, which shows that she is someone of lesser significance. In addition to this, she is confined to a dancing booth most of the time, a booth Tinker is in charge of, and in which he decides what she should do and when she is allowed to appear. It seems almost as if Tinker conjures her up in order to fill a void. Without Tinker, she does not exist, since she is basically irrelevant to the rest of the story. Can there be love if the two parts are not on equal terms? Tinker is someone who is in love with love. If one turns to *A Lover's Discourse* with this in mind, we see that it is an issue that Barthes also gives attention to: 'it is my desire that I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool.'[118] This applies to Tinker, because his craving for love is so strong that the desired object, in this case the woman, only serves to quench his desire. It is not the woman he loves, but the idea that he could be loved.

This can also be applied to M in *Crave*, because it seems that she is ignorant as to what love entails. Even so, she keeps uttering 'if love would come' (166). Her waiting for love is also pertinent here, as the idea of waiting is central to *A Lover's Discourse*: 'waiting is an enchantment: I have received *orders not to move*.'[119] Waiting is a passive act, and for M, and in fact all the characters in the play, it is an excuse for not moving forward. It is an excuse to avoid the present, and for allowing the passivity that ultimately kills them. Barthes notes: '*To make someone wait*: the constant prerogative of all power.'[120]

In *Crave*, Kane deals with three different types of love, all of which are taboo-related. First there is incestuous love, portrayed through C, who has been sexually abused by a family member (most likely her grandfather). Secondly, there is abusive love, which we encounter through the

[118] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 31.
[119] Ibid, p. 38.
[120] Ibid, p. 40.

character of M, as she continues to engage in abusive relationships with men. And lastly, there is paedophile love, which we meet through A. A, who delivers the most romantic monologue, triggers the question about what kind of love is accepted and what is not. Is the monologue beautiful if A is a paedophile? On the other hand, it is possible that A is not a paedophile, since he most often refers to the object of his affection as 'woman,' rather than 'girl'? Either way it is clear that he is longing for a lost love which he seems to be unable to forget. Considering the possibility that he is in fact a paedophile, the line 'only love can save me and love has destroyed me' (174) carries double meaning. He needs to retrieve his lost love in order to go on living, but if he is in fact a paedophile, this retrieval will criminalize him. On another note, this line could also merely indicate someone who is suffering from a broken heart, which is in fact pretty ordinary.

B, a character that I have given little attention to before, suddenly becomes important in relation to love. B is in love with the memory of love, or the memory of what he thought was love, and this is what inhibits him from really living. He acts like a rejected lover who can not recover from the fall. Lines like 'you fill my head as only someone who is absent can' (187), or 'if you died it would be like my bones had been removed. No one would know why, but I would collapse' (192), support this. However, B is also someone who is highly self-destructive ('I smoke till I'm sick' etc.), and there is an eerie feeling about him. Perhaps he once met the one he loved and raped her? Lines like 'Okay, I was, okay, I was, okay okay. I was, okay, two people, right?', 'I did nothing' (179), 'the thing I swore I'd never do, the thing I swore I'd – ' (180) and 'I am not a rapist [. . .] I'm a paedophile' (156) support that idea. He appears to be frantically responding to an accusation. Perhaps he lost all control over himself in the heat of the moment and did not consider it to be rape, but when his victim accused him of this, his world fell apart and he lost faith in everything. Either way, the fact that he has very little love for himself, means that it is improbable that he is able to accept any love from his surroundings.

4.48 Psychosis offers a different view of love, as the voice is clearly longing for a love that she has already lost. It is the love for the past that is portrayed here, a love that can never be realized. The voice's realisation of this fact leads to a slow resignation to loneliness and a flirtation with death. This is apparent through lines like 'built to be lonely. To love the absent' (219), or 'a song for my loved one, touching her absence the flux of her heart, the splash of her smile' (218). This play conveys the author's genuine sense of disappointment in people, in the world and in her self. It is also perceptible that it is more about the necessity of loving yourself than anything else. This is an underlying theme in Kane's other plays as well, but it is not until the very end, when death seems closer, that it becomes pivotal. The form of love has been narrowed down, and we see the necessity of directing it inwards. It forms the basis for every other form of love, because to be able to love anyone else you have to love yourself first. It is also, however, the most difficult form of love to attain, because you are inevitably always your own strongest critic. You know all of your own flaws and imperfections, and you have to love yourself in spite of them. The love for one self is deeper and more complex, but it is also the most important.

Saunders notes that in this play it is easy, not only to see the voices as belonging to one person, but also that 'the "awful physical aching fucking longing", in fact constitutes the search for self-hood.'[121] Love for oneself and self-respect is what none of Kane's characters have been able to attain, and they have all met their demise. In *4.48* we are faced with the difficult case of a voice that is aware, and regretful, that she has never been able to find her true self:

[121] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me.* p. 113.

I dread the loss of her I've never touched
love keeps me a slave in a cage of tears
I gnaw my tongue with which to her I can never speak
I miss a woman across the years that say we shall never meet

Everything passes
Everything perishes
Everything palls

My thought walks away with a killing smile
leaving discordant anxiety
which roars in my soul. (218)

The one the voice has never touched and now is afraid to lose, is herself. The woman who says that they shall never meet is an indication that she will never be able to know her true self, because it is too late and too much has happened. Moreover, the search for one's true self becomes increasingly difficult when medication is in the picture. Drugs alter who you are and your perception of the world, and since it interferes with your true self, to be able to meet your true self is next to impossible. In this case, the voice oscillates between two worlds, and is trying to decide if she should agree to the medication the doctors are advising her to take, or not. Correspondingly, she also realises that neither of the options will make any difference to her life situation, because if she is medicated she will in a sense be 'dead' of numbness and indifference, and if she stays 'mad,' she will probably kill herself. So, in a sense, she is already dead.

The voice also seems to have a strong wish to understand what is happening to her, to understand why she is where she is: 'I want to understand myself, to make myself understood, make myself known, be embraced'(60). The feeling of being left out, even from one's own life, is something that C in *Crave* is also struggling with. The common denominator between these two is that they are not able to let go of the past, and thus unable to understand the present. But while C appears to have been stagnated in the dark, the voice in *4.48* seems to undergo a certain development through the play. Her development, however, culminates in a paradox when she understands that she can never understand, because the key to understanding herself and her

present existence is herself, which is a person she has never gotten to know. The circle is completed in the penultimate sentence of the play: 'It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind' (245).

As I mentioned earlier, the idea of self-hood becomes increasingly problematic when it collides with mental illness and medication. In the next section I will concentrate on the phenomenon of suicide, both in relation to Kane's work and her life, and the way in which they were, doubtlessly, intertwined. I will also look briefly at the connection between writers and mental illness, since it seems to be a connection that can not be overlooked.

Sarah, Sylvia, Virginia and Anne

The sentence 'nothing will interfere with your work like suicide' (221) is one of the last lines of Kane's last play. Given that it is written by Kane herself shortly before her suicide, it shows that she was indeed aware of the consequences of her plans. The sentence indicates an anticipation of the scrutiny her plays and her life that would follow her death, and is a comment on the diversion in focus from the work to the person behind it. An author's suicide is the ultimate interference with his or her work, and Kane knew this. It is likely that she knew this based on how past authors have been put under the limelight after a suicide, including Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

'Dearest, I feel certain that I am going mad again: I feel we cant go through another of those terrible times. And I shant recover this time.'[122] This is the beginning of Virginia Woolf's last letter to her husband Leonard Woolf, which she wrote shortly before walking out into the river with stones in her pockets. She had been ill for a long time, and suicide was, as far as she could fathom, the only reasonable way out. Virginia Woolf is only one example of how artists seem more exposed to mental illnesses and how they lean more towards suicidal tendencies than

[122] See Herbert Marder, *The Measure of Life* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 342.

others. One likely explanation for this is the mental strain that diving into one's own unconsciousness, in order to create fiction, generates. The darkness becomes dominating. However, one can also wonder if perhaps the illness does not always derive from the artistry, but that the artistry derives from the illness, and that there are certain kinds of people who become artists. Either way, the connection is a fact. Al Alvarez exemplifies this connection between artists and mental illness in this century by shedding light on the many artistic minds who were subjected to mental illness and/or suicide:

> Of the great pre-modernists, Rimbaud abandoned poetry at the age of twenty, Van Gogh killed himself, Strindberg went mad. Since then the toll has mounted steadily. In the first great flowering of modernism, Kafka wanted to turn his premature natural death from tuberculosis into artistic suicide by having all his letters destroyed. Virginia Woolf drowned herself, a victim of her own excessive sensitivity. Hart Crane devoted prodigious energy to aestheticizing his chaotic life – a desperate compound of homosexuality and alcoholism – and finally, thinking himself a failure, jumped overboard from a steamer in the Caribbean. Dylan Thomas and Brendan Behan drank themselves to death. Atraud spent years in lunatic asylums [. . .] Cesare Pavese and Paul Celan, Randall Jarell and Sylvia Plath, Mayakovsky, Yesenin and Tsevetayeva killed themselves. Among the painters, the suicides include Modigliani, Arshile, Gorki, Mark Gertler, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.[123]

The similarity between Woolf, Plath and Sexton, besides the fact that they are women writers, is that their *ouevres* are dominated by images of death. We see this as in famous sentences by Plath like 'Dying is an art, like everything else, I do it exceptionally well.'[124] In comparison, this perhaps slightly lesser-known poem by Anne Sexton called 'Flee on your donkey' illustrates her own experience as a suicidal patient:

[123] Al Alvarez*, The Savage God*. (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1972), p. 197-198.
[124] Plath, 'Lady Lazarus,' from *Ariel* [1965] (London: Faber, 2001), p. 9.

Because there was no other place
to flee to,
I came back last night at midnight,
arriving in the thick June night
without language or defenses,
giving up my car keys and my cash,
keeping only a pack of Salem cigarettes
the way a child holds on to a toy.
I signed myself in where a stranger
puts in the inked-in X's –
for this is a mental hospital,
not a child's game.[125]

In this poem, Sexton gives a vivid description of admitting herself to a mental facility of some sort. It bears witness of someone who is finally able to see the seriousness in her own situation and who decides to help herself. Her giving up her car keys and her cash illustrates a commitment, knowing that by giving up these two things, she has close to no chance to escape should the impulse occur. It is also interesting that she says she is now without 'language or defenses,' since language is often the last thing that a person loses. Language is the ultimate civilized trait, and losing it really means losing what connects us to the human race. This can be compared to Kane in more than one way. First of all, Kane also admitted herself to a mental institution. Secondly, Kane also seemed to be aware of how language deteriorates during times of mental illness. This is seen in the way language is used in her plays, and how in her last play, which portrays a woman suffering from depression, the language is fragmented, as if illustrating someone who is about to lose it altogether.

There are, however, also differences between Woolf, Plath, Sexton and Kane, because they represent three quite different genres. Woolf was a novelist, Plath and Sexton were poets and Kane was a playwright. But while their treatment and presentation of the theme of death varied, their final fates were the same: they ended up with suicide as the way out. What they also

[125] First verse of 'Flee on your Donkey' by Anne Sexton, taken from Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), p. 176.

have in common, besides their attempts to challenge form, is the fact that they used their lives as a basis for their work. Furthermore, in my opinion, what often drives a reader to continue reading an author's piece of work, come from a sense of identification that the author has been able to produce in the reader. This identification may either be to the characters or the author, but the only way the author is able to achieve this is to draw on his or her own experiences. It must derive from something within the author. It is also my belief that this neither devalues nor degrades the work in any way. This is also relatable to Kane, as Phyllis Nagy states in an interview with Graham Saunders:

> GS: And it's a play that's clearly rooted in the real world.
> PS: Yes, it is. One can also say that Sarah's private world was her real world – who is anyone to say anything different? There is surely validity in that. This was the world she lived in so this was the world she wrote. On the other hand, there is a reason playwrights are playwrights and not essayists, say. There's a reason why Sarah wasn't a novelist or a poet – and part of the reason involved the desire to communicate in a particular way. In a public and immediate way. It does seem to require the desire to actively debate sets of ideas or emotions with a live audience.[126]

The issue of authorial absence leads us back to the idea of the romantic image of the author. For the Romantic author, autonomy may be said to be more important than anything else. What the author wrote would optimally be entirely original and 'wholly detached from social context.'[127]

Andrew Bennett addresses the issue of 'confessional writing,' which has been, and still is prevalent in the twentieth century, starting with Robert Lowell, and the aforementioned Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, among others.[128] It is a strong possibility that 'confessional writers' were to a larger extent prone to experience the connection between creativity and madness. Jeffrey A. Kottler addresses the challenges around this connection, and how this has been romanticized. It is a fact that, as he points out, there are more biographies written about people who have suffered from mental illness, than those who have not. The romanticizing, however, is not justified:

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[126] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 161.
[127] Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 71.
[128] Ibid, p. 70.

> Ancient Greek Philosophers such as Plato, Socrates and Aristotle lauded the benefits of divine madness, which they believed was literally a gift from the gods, the source of creative inspiration. But the condition is not nearly as much fun or as entertaining as it is cracked up to be. There is no way to romanticize or gloss over the debilitating severity of symptoms nor the depth of despair that is prevalent among those with a serious mental illness – no matter how productive they may have been in one domain.[129]

This romanticizing, however unethical it may be, still occurs. This is evident in the media coverage authors receive after their deaths or in the attention that their work gets after their suicides or the knowledge of mental illness have leaked to the public.

Critics tend to agree that to read a literary text as autobiography is to reduce it. Therefore, few authors will admit to having used their own life in their work. However, I think, to repeat and elaborate, that this belief reduces the *author*, it reduces a person's life to something that is less important than art, something that has to be hidden – for art's sake. Bennett notes that 'almost every major writer of the twentieth century seems to have produced a memoir or literary biography,' and then goes on to list some of these.[130]All of these, however, have fictional names and can therefore not be called 'biographies.'

Kane was one of those, as I mentioned before, who wanted her work to be seen as something separate from her historical self. This of course becomes increasingly difficult when Kane herself made statements about her work which rooted them in her own life. But the final factor which makes it difficult for the audience to separate Kane and her work is her suicide. The knowledge of her suicide entices the audience into learning more about her life, and what they find is hauntingly similar to what is described in her work, especially *4.48 Psychosis,* where there are passages that describe in detail the symptoms of someone suffering from suicidal depression. In a way similar to Kane, Kottler claims that, 'Plath's art is inseparable from her emotional struggles.'[131] He also points out about Plath that

[129] Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Divine Madness: Ten Stories of Creative Struggle* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 5.
[130] Bennett, *The Author*, p. 70.
[131] Kottler, *Divine Madness*, p. 31.

> Immediately after her death, Plath's collection of poetry, *Ariel*, sold over five thousand copies in England alone, most of them purchased not by fans of poetry but rather by those, according to biographer Edward Butcher, 'who apparently felt compelled to possess the last will and testament of a frustrated kindred spirit, or who wished to certify their own normalcy by comparing their sensibilities to those of a "mad woman."' In the end, it was Plath's madness, as much as her creativity, that garnered so much attention and devotion.[132]

The undeniable fact that Plath and Kane's mental states did contribute to their popularity, however, should be detrimental to their artistic qualities. We must bear in mind that Sylvia Plath is long since canonized, and that Kane is still considered one of the most important new British dramatists. There is a reason why these lines are included in Virginia Woolf's last letter to her husband Leonard: 'will you destroy all my papers.'[133] There is also a reason why Plath's *Ariel*, which was published posthumously and after news of her suicide had leaked to the press, sold more copies than any other collection of poetry by a female poet.[134] The author, who removes her or himself from the world, is reborn in her or his work. As David Greig notes: 'Suicide always poses a question, and the suicide of a writer leaves material over which the living can only pore in the search for answers.'[135] Suicide leaves material even if there really is no biographical material there accessible to us, because when the author is no longer here to disprove our assumptions, there are no limits to where the imagination can go. Therefore, suicide is not an end; it is a beginning.

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[132] Kottler, *Divine Madness,* p. 30.
[133] Marder, *The Measure of Life*, p. 343.
[134] Biographer Paul Alexander gives two examples of articles about Plath's death. One is from *The Observer* on Feb. 17, 1963, which was an homage written by Al Alvarez titled 'A poet's epitaph.' An extract from the article says: 'Last Monday, Sylvia Plath, the American poetess and wife of Ted Hughes , died suddenly in London.' The Saint Pancras *Chronicle* on Feb. 22 that same year, however, was less candid about her death. The article was titled 'Tragic Death of Young Authoress' and began: 'Found with her head in the gas oven in the kitchen of their home in Fitzroy road, N.W.1, last week was 30-year-old- authoress Mrs. Sylvia Plath Hughes, wife of one of Britain's best known modern poets Ted Hughes,' see Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Viking, 1991), p. 334-337.
[135] Greig, 'Introduction' to *Complete Plays*, p. xvii.

In the interview that Graham Saunders does with actor Daniel Evans, they talk a lot about *4.48*, and how the actors prepared for the staging of the play.[136] The preparation included a trip to Maudsley Hospital, where Sarah had been admitted, reading *The Book of Revelations*, which was her main source in terms of religious allusion, and reading many of the books that Kane was inspired by while writing the play. Saunders asks Evans how they managed to trace all these books down, and Evans answered that they got it from her brother Simon, and that these books were actually on Sarah's bedside at the time she died. Among these books were several books on suicide, and most importantly Shneidman's *The Suicidal Mind*, which she had extracted passages from and put into the play. Evans points out that the lists at the end of *4.48* were directly taken from that book. This is an extract from the list in the play:

To defy convention
To avoid pain
To avoid shame
To obliterate past humiliation by resumed action
To maintain self-respect
To repress fear
To overcome weakness
To belong
To be accepted
To draw close and enjoyably reciprocate with another
To converse in a friendly manner, to tell stories, exchange sentiments, ideas, secrets
To communicate, to converse
To laugh and make jokes
To win affection of desired Other
To adhere and remain loyal to Other
To enjoy sensuous experiences with cathected Other
To feed, help, protect, comfort, console, support, nurse or heal
To be fed, helped, protected, comforted, consoled, supported, nursed or healed
To form mutually enjoyable, enduring, cooperating and reciprocating relationship with Other, with an equal
To be forgiven
To be loved
To be free. (233-235)

[136] Daniel Evans acted in both *Cleansed* at the Royal Court in 1998 and in *4.48 Psychosis* at the Royal Court in 2001 and 2001. Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 168.

I later came to realize that Schneidman's list is really a 'psychological pain survey' in which the patient is asked to check three of the following according to 'my worst psychological pain related mostly to my *needs':*[137]

To achieve difficult goals
To be loved by someone
To belong or to be affiliated
To overcome opposition
To be free of social confinement
To make up for past failure
To defend myself against others
To influence and control others
To receive attention from others
To avoid pain or injury
To avoid shame or humiliation
To protect my psychological space
To nurture or take care of someone to keep things or ideas in good order
To enjoy sensuous experiences
To be taken care of by someone
To understand certain hows and whys

The person that Schneidman has made an example of had checked the two last options, and added an extra 'other: to be safe.' This shows that it is when the most basic of human needs are not met, that people tend to develop mental illnesses.

This list has obviously made a great impression on Kane, so much in fact that she made her own list, and included it in her last play. It is a universal list, and it is therefore relevant to all of the other characters in her plays. It is up to the audience and the readers, however, to consider which needs are actually realised and of which they have been deprived.

It is apparent that Kane was not only suicidal but that she also dove into the subject of being suicidal, that she read about her own illness, perhaps from fascination or perhaps in order to use it in her work, to make it more general and applicable. Mel Kenyon, as has been noted, states that she is 'still angry that she [Sarah] felt she had to dig so deep to write her last play that she couldn't find another way out.'[138]

[137] See Edwin S. Schneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 176
[138] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 153.

Talking about her last play *4.48 Psychosis* in an interview, James Mcdonald mentions that during the first run of the play there was 'a considerable level of tension because everyone in the audience knew that the writer had killed herself.'[139] By this time, most people had recognized that Kane's work was about Kane's life. Perhaps the tension in the audience was due to a curiosity that needed to be fed, perhaps it came out of an admiration for someone who dared to make an example of herself, or perhaps it was because of an underlying respect for an author whose small body of work managed to challenge many of our given truths. However, it must have been quite a powerful experience, probably also a bit uncomfortable, to sit through a performance of *4.48*, knowing that the relatively recently dead author was so closely linked to the words that were spoken on stage.

An end to an end

4.48 Psychosis is a demanding play in a number of ways. It is difficult to read, both because of the form and because so much of the meaning is in and behind the words. It is difficult to stage because characters are replaced by voices, and because it is not specified how many there are. Moreover, the author herself was not around to give explanations or make corrections when the time of the first staging came. In addition to this, the play also invites problems in terms of interpretation and reception.

The play's title alludes to the time of day when the suicidal mind is at its most fragile. According to Dr. Horder, Sylvia Plath's doctor, she too committed suicide 'at the time when suicide is most common, at night's end.'[140] In the play, Kane comments about this difficult time when night ends and day is just about to break, and although this is on a text-internal level, it is not difficult to recognize its relevance to reality:

[139] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 125.
[140] Marianne Egeland, *Sylvia Plath*, (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2004), p. 127. 'Det skjedde på det tidspunktet selvmord er vanligst, ved nattens slutt.' My translation.

> At 4.48
> when sanity visits
> for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind.
> When it has passed I shall be gone again,
> a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool.
> Now I am here I can see myself
> but when I am charmed by the vile delusions of happiness,
> the foul magic of this engine of sorcery,
> I cannot touch my essential self. (229)

The voice here speaks about when she is able to touch her 'essential self.' This metaphysical question of what is essential and what is not is a central one in psychology. Without elaborating too much on this, I must mention that the main problem of determining essentiality is that one can never know what is inflicted upon us by our environment, or what we have inherited biologically. What is 'the real you'? Furthermore, in this case the issue is complicated because of a mental illness that creates a state of oscillation between what is supposedly 'the essential self' and the illness. This is what Kane is addressing above: the allegedly sane hour she has before the illness takes over again. But can mentally ill people distinguish between when they are ill and when they are not? This seems highly unlikely. On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, Kane personally admitted herself to hospital on several occasions, which indicates that there are in fact different levels to this illness, and that it is in fact possible to be able to distinguish between them. Moreover, the essential self Kane is talking about might also indicate a drug-free self, the period of time when the medication is starting to wear off, and she is waiting for another dosage.

This issue of essentiality may be seen to transcend to the reader's quest for the author's intentions. Kane included comments on this throughout *4.48*: 'Why do you believe me then and not now?'(229). This, as most other of Kane's lines, carries double meanings. On one text-internal level it can be interpreted as the patient speaking to her therapist, and asking her if she is able to distinguish when she is 'sane' and when she is 'ill,' when she is speaking the truth, and when her illness is speaking. On a text-external level, it can represent a comment made by Kane

on the way in which her person is interpreted by the critics, because of her illness. 'Why do you believe me then and not now?' is a question raised out of doubt. It is a doubt that her audience and her critics would not be able to separate Kane from her work, but that they would assume that the voice in *4.48* really is herself. The author seems to be asking: why would you think the plays I wrote in my 'sane' period were fictional, but that what I wrote during my periods of illness was a direct reflection of me?

In an article in *The Guardian*, colleague and friend Mark Ravenhill states that it was during the time around *Crave* that he 'became aware of Kane's problems with mental illness.'[141] However, he also claims that 'there's a danger that we see all of Kane's work as one long preparation for suicide. We shouldn't. Only the last play, *4.48 Psychosis*, is a play written during her periods of depression.' The question is: how can he know this for sure? How can anyone?

Kane suffered from depression only for periods, and her plays bear witness to someone who had an insight into her own situation. This is amply evident in the way she was able to portray illness in her plays, and especially in *4.48*. But none of us can predict which parts of her work were written when she was well and when she was not. We can only know that she used her experience and her illness in order to create art, to create something which may turn out to be of lasting interest. 'Stop judging by appearances and make a right judgement' (229) is an emphasis on the fact that things are not always what they seem, and that sometimes we have to look closer. However, there is often no right or wrong judgement, merely judgement. How we choose to judge Kane, regardless of how much she advocates her own separation from her work, will necessarily depend on what she has created. The voice in *4.48* says: 'we're all going to disappear/trying to leave a mark more permanent than myself' (241). Kane's work is her mark, it is what is left after she is gone, and that is exactly what will continue to colour our perceptions of who she was.

[141] Mark Ravenhill, 'Suicide Art? She's better than that,' *The Guardian* online ed., October 12, 2005, see: http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1589951,00.html.

CONCLUSION

'You can not say, or guess, for you know only
a heap of broken images.'[142]

The epigraph is taken from T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land.' To me it perfectly illustrates the problem one is faced with when trying to write about an author's life. One can never know the whole story, because it will never be available for us to know. A person is so much more than language will ever be able to capture. We can only know fragments of the truth from what has been presented to us, from their literary works or from interviews and other non-fictional texts. What Kane ultimately presented to us were fragments, fragments of a mind which was tormented by an illness she had little control over, and that she ultimately decided she could no longer live with.

To write about Sarah Kane has been difficult. Not only because her work is difficult, but because relatively little has been written about her so far, and, as I have noted earlier, most of the more serious material available concerns her plays rather than her biography. This may very well have been what she wanted. It is tempting to think that information about her life has been both hidden and muffled in the aftermath of her death, perhaps for the sake of preserving the myth and the autonomy of her plays. It will, however, be interesting to see what Graham Saunders' upcoming book on Kane will reveal. I have been in contact with Saunders, hoping that the book would be finished before this thesis was due, but regretfully, this is not the case.

It would also have been interesting to have had the time and space to include analyses of Kane's earlier plays and how they varied both in terms of themes and reception. It would in this connection have been extremely valuable to have had access to such things as audience and sales figures. Moreover, how many of those who see her plays today are aware of the myths surrounding Kane? How many see them because of it?

[142] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and other Poems* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 23.

As I mentioned earlier, Kane was not the only person responsible for her success, or the myth that followed it. Certainly, her plays have paved the way for young generations of playwrights because of the experimentation with form etc, but there are also other factors to consider here. Kane's debut came at a time when British theatre sorely needed a new and challenging voice. James Mcdonald, a well-known and respected director and an associate director at the Royal Court Theatre, directed *Blasted*, *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis*. *Blasted* produced much controversy and made people reassess their own boundaries in relation to Art. In addition to this, the fact that Kane struggled with mental disorders was exploited by the media in order to enforce a stronger reaction to her plays than these had already received. This enhanced the already strong assumptions that there was something wrong with this playwright, who despite her young age was able to write screamingly violent and gut-wrenching plays. Most of us have some awareness of how the media works, and that it can either help or damage someone's career, and that occasionally it does both. The media does not always reflect popular opinion, but often aims to provoke, to cause a reaction. Kane herself was clearly aware of this. At one stage she shared an experience she had: '"I'd quite like to review plays," she says. "In fact, I was asked to review Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* for the *Observer*. I was really keen to do it, and then they phoned me up and said: 'If you don't like it, that would be great,' and I thought: this is a set-up. So I didn't do it."'[143] Singer also argues that there are several factors that need to be taken into account regarding Kane's success: 'I try to tease out the institutions that created the explosive performance of Sarah Kane's career. Critics, academics, students, agents, theatre practitioners, audience members, and doctors all played a role.'[144] The creation of Kane's myth was a team-work accomplishment.

The changes in the reception of a work after an author has died have also contributed to the establishment of a myth of the author in this case. James Mcdonald comments that: 'the

[143] Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), p.120-121.
[144] Annabelle Singer, 'Don't Want to Be this: The Elusive Sarah Kane' *TDR: The Drama Review: a Journal for Performance Studies*, 48:2 (Summer, 2000), 140.

clever ones have backtracked a long way since the days of *Blasted*, as the best critics once did [when] faced with the work of Osborne, Pinter, Bond.'[145] Sierz also mentions notes 'The central problem with Kane's work is that, while she was alive, the power of her stage images tended to detract from the depths of her writing; now that she's dead, the fact that she killed herself threatens once more to obscure her achievement.'[146] Should we learn from this that Kane's work was never appreciated for what it was? Was it always overshadowed by something outside the work? One might rather argue that a judgement of a piece of work will always be inflicted with and influenced by outside factors. It is impossible to escape context. If nothing else, think of each spectator or reader's particular horizons of expectation. However, perhaps no single contextual factor is likely to interfere more with the work than the knowledge of the author's suicide. This is so, not only due to our fascination with death, but also because suicide is so often surrounded by mystery. There is a powerful romantic myth, at least going all the way back to the late 18th century poets.

At one point in Kane's last play the voice says that 'I think you think of me the way I'd have you think of me'(243). On a meta-level, this may indicate an author who was blatantly aware of her role in her mystification. As I mentioned earlier, Kane herself also contributed to the media, and in doing so she drew attention to herself as a person. By including biographical facts in her plays and speaking about this in interviews, or saying for example that when she wrote *Cleansed* she was in love, and that when she wrote *Crave* she had gone through a break up, she gave people what they needed in order to further create meanings which inevitably connected her to her plays. Kane claimed, not unlike Peter Høeg, that the voices in her plays were both herself and not herself, that her work was both biographical and not biographical at all. In this way she also actuated of the double - contract. Most readers or literary critics are located on one side of the dividing fence between what is biography and what is fiction, but perhaps this fence

[145] Macdonald in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 90.
[146] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 90.

only serves as a disabler that locks us into certain perceptions. In 'The Waste Land,' a key text for Kane as we have seen, T. S. Eliot wrote that 'We think of the key, each in his prison. Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.'[147] It is perhaps a matter of both-and. By repeatedly emphasising the divide between biography and fiction, by repeating and affirming the dichotomy, we create our own prison, and in doing so we also limit the possibilities of what literature can be – not only something to be put on a pedestal, but something that honours our lives, honours us as human beings. Sarah Kane's work is not alive only because she died. It is still performed long after the storm around her has calmed down, because her plays reflect, by example, our own fragility.

[147] Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, p. 39.

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